



アーマード・ガールズ
01. 姫焰邂逅

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!!壁咲

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学園都市
アーチ
アーチ
アーチ

01.
姫焰邂逅

きえん
かいこう



クローディア・フィールド
CLAUDIA ENFIELD

「ふふ、冗談です。かわいらしい反応をされますね」

Saya Sasaki miya

沙々宮紗夜

SAYA SASAKI

「思ってた以上に
大変そうな学園だなあ、
ここ……」

ユリス・アレクシア・
ヴァン・リースフィルト
JULIS-ALEXIA VAN RIJSVELD

天霧綾斗
《赤面姫・赤内助》
AYATO AHARU

「私が勝つたら、
その時はおまえを
好きにさせてもらう」

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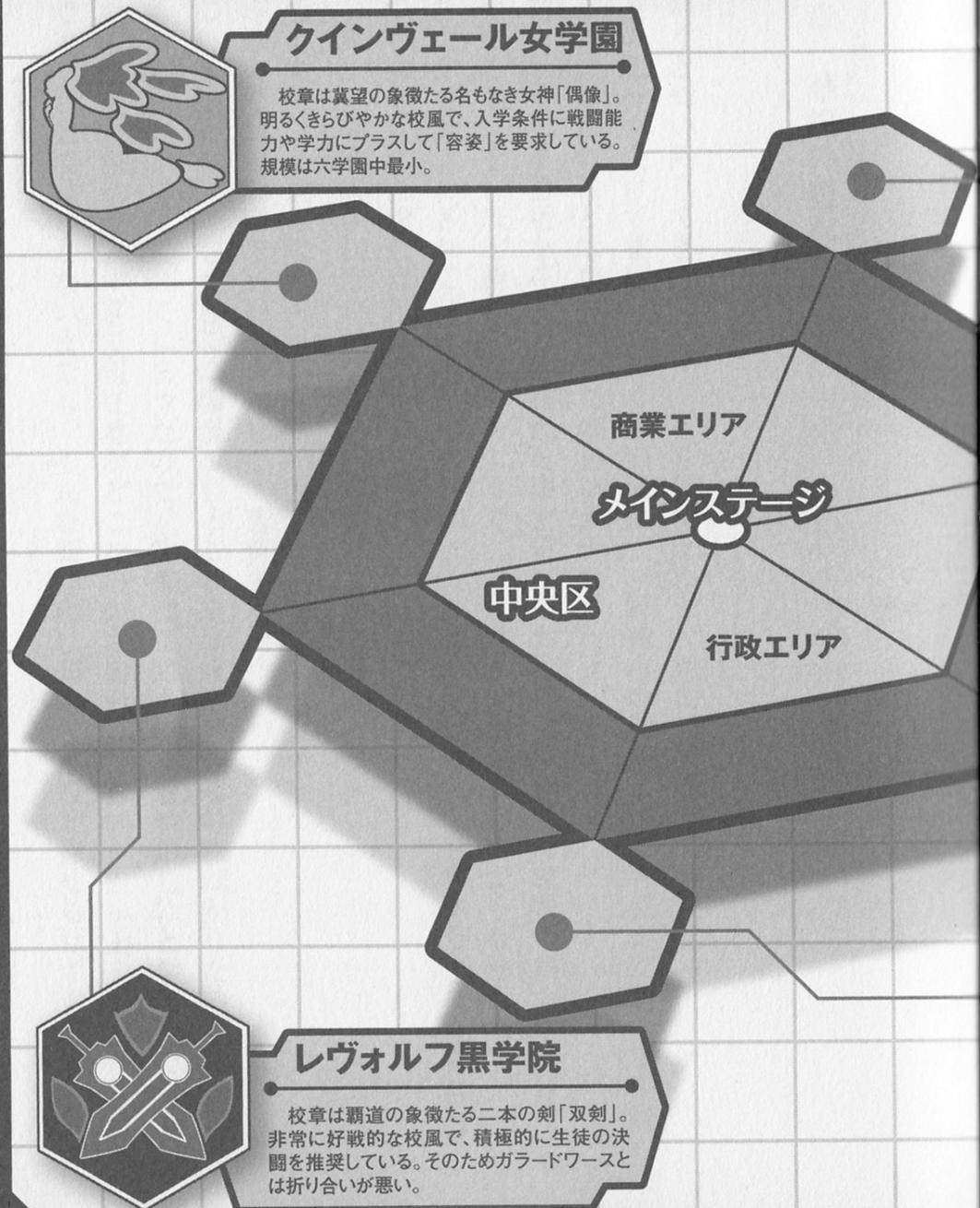
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Chapter 1: The Petalblaze Witch(Gruene Rose)

Ayato caught it almost by reflex as it fluttered down from the sky.

Appearing to shine brilliantly in the first rays of the early summer sun, looking for an instant so much like a snow-white feather -- what he grasped in his hand was nothing quite so spectacular; it was just a handkerchief.

Judging from the embroidery of the lovely, yet clumsy flower pattern, it was likely not a manufactured item, but handmade. It seemed a little worn, and closer inspection revealed the vestiges of past repairs.

The deep sentiment its owner held for that handkerchief was clearly conveyed.

It was inconceivable that it had been intentionally discarded.

"...Was it stolen by the wind?"

If that was the case, then where on earth did it come from...?

Looking around as he thought that, Ayato smiled wryly.

After all, Ayato had only just now arrived at this city -- and also only just arrived at Seidoukan Academy. Having arrived a little earlier than expected, he'd gone for a stroll around the school grounds to kill time until the appointed time, but the site was so large that he had no sense of his current location. Even if he'd followed the footpath, and thus wasn't lost per se, there was still no way for a newcomer to find the handkerchief's owner.

"It can't be helped; I'll turn it in at the office later."

Anyway, since he would meet with the Student Council President after this, he could hand it over then.

Thinking that, Ayato carefully folded the handkerchief and put it in his pocket.

The current time would still be regarded as the early morning, and birdsong echoed through the boardwalk surrounded by bright green trees.

Looking at the scenery, so abundantly favored with nature's grace, it was hard to imagine this was an artificial island. Nonetheless, this was one section of the War-Academy City Asterisk, well-known throughout the

world. It went without saying that no expense had been spared when it came to groundskeeping.

However, Ayato was brought to his senses after hearing a faintly panicked voice from the other side of such trees.

Clear as a bell, and lovely enough not to lose out to the small birds' singing, and yet a voice which revealed a strong will.

"Ahhh! Of all the things that could happen, why at a time like this...!"

But, listening carefully, the content of what he overheard could hardly be referred to as lovely.

Turning in the direction of the voice, he looked up at a room with a large, open window.

Standing in a location set a little away from the footpath was a building of neat and classic structure.

"Anyway, I'd better go after it before it flies far away...!"

The voice which floated over from the other side of the fluttering curtain was filled with urgency.

"... I see."

Ayato turned his gaze to his pocket before looking up once again at the room.

Originally, Ayato was not that perceptive a person.

Nonetheless, if it was, after all, a situation as easy to understand as this, then it was another matter.

"The fourth floor, huh... Well, since there are also footholds, I think there shouldn't be a problem."

Though there was an iron fence about two meters high between the walkway and the building, Ayato jumped over it lightly, without needing a running start. Taking hold of a nearby tree branch, he casually climbed up.

For Ayato, a member of the <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella), such a task was indeed trivial.

"Hup...!"

The target room was located further above the trees, but Ayato jumped from a handy branch to the window frame in one go. Arching his body like a cat, he landed almost soundlessly.

"Errr, Sorry to just pop in like this. By chance a little while ago, this handkerchief..."

Ayato had chosen the quickest way. Since the voice's owner seemed to have been quite in the hurry, he'd thought that handing it over the sooner the better was best after all.

It was a simple, pure intent. Assuredly.

Nevertheless, his good intentions had resulted in problems -- and big ones at that -- of which there were two.

One was that the building was the High School Girls Dormitory of Seidoukan Academy.

And another was that the owner of the room was just in the middle of getting dressed.

"Eh...?"

"Huh...?"

The girl, who was slipping her foot into a skirt, and Ayato stared at one another's faces with altogether dumbfounded expressions.

The girl's age seemed around the same as Ayato's, 16 or 17 years old.

With pale green eyes like young leaves. With the bridge of the nose which straight (high straight along the nose), and skin as white as fresh snow.

The color of the long hair which flowed down to her waist was not so deep as to be called scarlet, though also too bright red to call pink. If you had to pick a color... it would be rose.

Her face was also stunningly beautiful. Though it was his first time meeting her, Ayato was captivated.

Besides, the girl was now half-naked.



「な、な、な…」

「う、いや、あの、ごめん！
俺は別にそんなつもりじゃ全然なくて…」

The uniform buttons were undone on her upper body, and even her underwear was exposed. Since her body was bent, her bosom was also completely visible.

The swelling of her bosom was modest, but the curves of her body were distinctly feminine, and her waist was slim.

Her healthy and flexible legs were nimbly stretching on her toes, and shining between her thighs was lovely, pure white underwear drawing the gaze.

This sort of clumsy, half-naked appearance was definitely more sensational than full-on nudity.

The two people, for a while, did not move, as if frozen solid. Since the girl was in a situation where she had one leg raised, one could say that she had an amazing sense of balance.

It was as if time had stopped, but of course, things could not simply continue in this manner.

It was Ayato who came to his senses first.

"So-sorry! No, errr, I never meant to peep!"

Although he somehow tried to explain himself, his words fumbled as they came out.

He tried to cover his eyes with both his hands for the time being, but he could perfectly see her charming appearance from the gap between his fingers.

"Wh-wh-wh...!"

The girl, on the other hand, had finally grasped the situation. Her face dyed bright red, she flapped her mouth open and closed.

Was it out of shame, or anger, or both?

Ayato resigned himself for the scream that was inevitably coming.

As the girl deeply inhaled while hurriedly covering her body, with tears in the edge of her eyes, she fiercely glared at Ayato.

"--Tu-turn the other way!"

She said so in a low voice with barely repressed emotions.

"Eh?"

"It's fine, just turn around already!"

At that peremptory tone, he obeyed in a hurry.

The light sound of clothes rustling came from behind him. In addition to that, there was also a somehow strangely nice smell.

Ayato was unable to settle down.

Furthermore, he was still situated on the window frame. A moment of carelessness would be all it would take to plunge down below.

Almost losing his balance to occasional bursts of wind, he waited for several minutes.

"Phew... O-okay, it's fine."

Finally hearing her voice, Ayato turned his head back and saw a splendidly beautiful girl.

That figure, which was wearing an impeccable uniform, was filled with grace and elegance, to the point that her earlier appearance seemed to be a lie. Though her moody expression and her severe gaze clearly conveyed her bad mood, it still looked somehow lovely.

As Ayato was unintentionally admiring her, the girl cut straight to the point.

"So, the handkerchief?"

"...Yes?"

"Didn't you mention it earlier? Something about a handkerchief."

"Ah, Oh yeah! well, it's this..."

Ayato took the handkerchief from earlier out of his pocket, and presented it toward the girl.

"The wind carried it to me earlier and I picked it up. Here, could this be yours?"

"..."

The girl greatly opened her eyes wide for an instant, and soon deeply breathed as she feeled relieved.

"Thank God..."

And as she received the handkerchief from Ayato, she gently held it to her chest.

"...Sorry. It's something very... very precious to me."

"No, I just happened to come across it, totally by accident..."

"Even so, you saved me. I'm really grateful."

To Ayato who scratched his head while being embarrassed, the girl deeply bowed politely.

--But.

"Now then, do you think that it's all settled?"

With her head still lowered, the girl muttered so.

Her voice was different from that of until now, filled with emotions that could explode at any moment.

"Eh...?"

The face of the girl, who slowly raised her head, was wearing a smile.

But her eyes did not laugh at all.

The edge of her lips which drew an arc with a smile was convulsively twitching.

"Then -- Go to hell!"

The next moment, the whole atmosphere of the room changed.

The Star-Power(Prana) of the girl increased explosively, and the atmosphere rumbled. A chemical element was converted by the Mana, which given direction, awakened the phenomenon.

(This presence, don't tell me she is...!)

"Come into bloom – Six-Petal Burst Firebloom(Amaryllis)!"

At that moment, a huge fireball appeared before the girl, and was aimed at Ayato.

"A <Witch>(Strega)!"?

Suddenly jumping from the window, he adjusted his posture in the air and landed.

A roaring sound echoed almost at the same time. Looking up, a huge firebloom (flame flower) opened its bud in the air. It was a large flower of exploding flame, with overlapping blazing petals.

The air vibrated as the gust of heat rushed past. It showed just how the explosion possessed a tremendous power.

"...No, no, no."

As Ayato was taken aback, inside where sparks poured down, the girl let her body lightly leap from the opened window. Like Ayato, she gracefully dropped to the ground without problem from the height of the fourth floor.

The girl was a <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella) who possessed a phenomenal physical ability due to her adaptability with Mana -- and besides, judging from the ability she used earlier, there was no doubt she would be a <Witch>(Strega), whose existence was especially unique even among them (Genestella).

Starting with this Seidoukan Academy, most of the Students of the six Academies present in Asterisk were <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella). Even Ayato, who was almost completely uninterested in the <Star War Festival>(Festa), knew at least this. And though by adapting the "Mana", <Witch>(Strega) and <Magician>(Danchi) could bend even the physical laws of this world, he also knew just how rare of an existence they were.

According to a theory, even among the <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella), those who revealed talent as <Witch>(Strega) or <Magician>(Danchi) were only a few percent. In the first place, even though there was an increasing tendency, the <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella) themselves were still a rare species. Speaking of that rarity, it could be easily inferred.

Ayato himself had actually so far come in contact with only one <Witch>(Strega)"Oho... To be able to dodge that, you are pretty good."

The girl's anger spread in her voice, as she gave a little admiration.

"Fine then, if it's the case, I will take you a little more seriously."

Sensing the girl's Star-Power(Prana) rising again, Ayato hastily raised both his hands calmly.

"Woah, woah, just wait a minute!"

"What? If you have just stayed calm, I could have just cooked you to well done and let you off."

"Are you really overflowing with desire to roast me alive?"

Without even feeling the slightest hesitation.

"Or rather, I want to know why you're going for my life..."

"Since you peeped on a maiden changing clothes, it would be only natural to compensate with your life."

The girl calmly declared such a dangerous thing.

"If it's the case, then what was the thanks you gave me earlier...?"

"I'm of course thankful to you for returning the handkerchief. But... this and that are different issues."

"...Couldn't you be a little flexible about this?"

"Unfortunately, I hate the word 'flexible'."

While smiling, she drastically discarded that option.

There was no way to get along.

"In the first place, there was no need to return it by coming through the window, right? Besides, it's not unreasonable to beat up a pervert who sneaks into the girl's dormitory."

"...Eh? Girl's dormitory?"

Ayato, with a stunned look, slowly compared the girl and building.

Sweat quickly flowed from Ayato's temple.

"Don't tell me... you didn't know?"

"Not knowing or whatever, I'm a stranger who planned to transfer into this Academy today, and besides, I just recently arrived here. I swear it's not a lie."

As Ayato said so, he showed his brand-new uniform.

Since he had not yet got used to wearing the brand-new uniform, both the jacket and the pants were still quite firm.

The girl stared at Ayato with eyes which seemed to be doubtful for a while, but she soon gave a deep sigh.

"OK. I'll believe you."

At the moment when Ayato was going to heave a sigh of relief to those words.

"But, after all, this and that are different issues."

Around the girl who said so with a smile, fireballs appeared again. Though smaller in size compared to that of earlier, this time there were nine in total.



"Come into bloom -- Dancing Nine-Tower-Flower!"^[1]

"Uwah!"

Nine fireballs in the form of a lovely primrose, each with a different orbit attacked Ayato.

As Ayato twisted his body and dodged them, the fireballs that hit the ground burst and disappeared along with a dull explosion sound.

The concrete pavement set in the style of cobblestones, had holes completely gouged out. Though it might be preferable to the earlier explosion, this power was also enough to let a chill runs down one's spine.

Regarding the body tissues, the muscles of the <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella) were made stronger than those of ordinary humans; if the Star-Power(Prana) was concentrated, even the physical body could raise a defensive force enough to at least protect against a bullet, but still if it hit directly, one could not get away unscathed.

In addition, the remaining fireballs incessantly attacked Ayato from all directions.

"Wa-wa-wah...!"

However, Ayato outdid those attacks by a hairbreadth.

Sometimes by leaping vertically, and sometimes by bending his body, he dodged them at the limit.

At those movements, the girl was surprised once again and opened her eyes wide.

"I see, you don't seem to be just a pervert."

Ayato, who took in color at the clear praise for that voice, wiped the sweat from his forehead relieved.

She seemed once again to revise her opinion on him.

Perhaps, it might be somehow manageable.

"You're an extraordinary pervert."

Or not.

"It seems that a mutual understanding will be difficult..."

He unintentionally threw up such a complaint.

"Hmph, it is a joke."

Then the girl, while glaring at Ayato with half-opened eyes, flicked back her hair.

"It seems to be a fact that you were returning the handkerchief to me with good intentions, my, um... S- Seeing me changing, too, w-well, I can believe it wasn't on purpose, in a sense. B-But, only in a sense!"

"...Really?"

Also because of the fact that he rejoiced prematurely repeatedly, still he became prudent and tried to ask.

The girl, with a reluctant feeling, also while nodding, continued speaking.

"However, not confirming what building it was, was your mistake, the attitude like suddenly coming in from the window, you understand that not everything can be forgiven just because you didn't do it on purpose, right?"

"That's... quite right."

There were no words of rebuttal.

"You have made your point, but it doesn't settle my anger. And so, we will follow the rules of this city. Fortunately, you seem to be talented in your own way, you won't complain, right?"

The girl said so, and stared straight at Ayato's face.

"What is your name?"

"Amagiri Ayato."

"I see. I'm Julis. Ranked fifth in Seidoukan Academy, Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld."

The girl, who named herself Julis, held out her right hand to the Seidoukan Academy's school badge, a "red lotus", adorning her chest.

"In the name of the red lotus serving as proof of the inflexible, I, Julis-Alexia van Riessfeld hereby challenged you, Ayato Amagiri, to a duel!"

"Duel!?"

Despite Ayato being surprised, the school badge on Ayato's chest school emitted a red light accordingly.

When petitioning for a duel, the decision whether to accept or reject it must be requested.

"If you win, I'll quietly withdraw with my complaint. But if I win, you'll do whatever I want you to do."

Saying so as if it was natural, Julis grinned and laughed.

"W-Wait a minute. I can't just --"

"Since you have transferred here, no matter what, you do know at least of the duel, right?"

He was peremptorily asked.

"...Well, I did hear something about it but..."

Thinking it through completely, one might say that all the students who lived in this Asterisk were gathered here in order to fight.

The world's largest battle entertainment <Star Wars Festival>(Festa). Here was the stage, since the students of each Academy were, all, player candidates.

"Then, hurry up and accept it. There is even a crowd forming."

As Ayato looked around after being said so, the two of them had certainly become the center of attention before he knew it.

They probably heard the commotion and came. Though most were likely female students from the site of the girl's dormitory, there were also figures of male students looking from the distant circle formed by the crowd here and there.

"Hey, hey, what, what?"

"The <Petalblaze Witch>(Gruene Rose) seems to want to duel!"

"Seriously!? Isn't she a Top Twelve(Page One)? They can't overlook that!"

"So, who is the opponent and where does he come from?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen his face before... How about the net?"

"I'm looking now... But, he doesn't appear in the Battle Omnicon(Named Cards)."

"Is he not on the list? Well it's a courageous challenger again."

"How long will he last? That 'Princess' isn't of a nature to go easy at all on her opponents."

"Three minutes."

"One minute."

"Wait wait, the odds of the net will come out very soon... Well, within three minutes, it's the double."

"There is a bookmaker who is already opened. You guys are being quick-eared as always."

"The journalism club is already providing live commentary. Hey, here or there?"

While listening to the voices of such outfield, Ayato frowned, and was troubled.

He disliked being in the center of attention.

"Why is this getting such attention...?"

"There are two reasons. The first one is the collection of data of the key students -- in this case, my data. I may look like this, but I am one of the Top Twelve(Page One) of this Academy, if there is a chance, there are a lot of people who aim to defeat others."

"Top Twelve(Page One)?"

"...Must I explain it from the beginning?"

Julis stared at Ayato with dubious eyes.

"Fine then, you know that each academy of Asterisk has a ranking system, right? Although the rules differ from one academy to another, each academy has a ranking list that clarifies who sits at the top of each academy; that is the Battle Omnicon(Named Cards). There is a limit of 72 names in the book. The top twelve among them who have their names appeared on the first page of the list are commonly known as Top Twelve(Page One)."

I see.

"And the second reason is simple and clear, all the guys here are just fools who are dying to watch a match here."

...I see.

"Well, if you don't want to fight no matter what, then it can't be helped. You also have the right to refuse the duel. But, in that case, I'm going to hand it over to the vigilance committee of the girl's dormitory."

Before he knew it, the escape route had completely disappeared.

"Ah, But you know, I don't carry a weapon."

Even so, he tried to struggle until the bitter end.

It seemed that some students enrolled with their own weapon-armaments, but most people were basically using customized supplies from the Academy. Since Ayato intended to do so if necessary, he did not naturally bring any weapons.

"You're not a <Magician>(Danchi), right? What weapon do you use?"

"...a sword."

"Could someone lend him a weapon? A sword is fine."

As Julis asked so towards the spectators, a reaction came back immediately.

"All right, he can use this."

With those words, something was thrown towards Ayato from the crowd.

What he received was a short rod-shaped apparatus. Fitting perfectly in one hand, there was an emerald green crystal at the tip -- a 'Mana Dite' was inserted.

It was an activation tool for the Shining Type Armament(Lux)"If you don't know how to use it, I'm not going to tell you."

Julis saying so fearlessly smiled.

"Haa..."

As Ayato deeply sighed, he activated the Shining Type Armament(Lux) in his hand.

The element pattern stored by the Mana Dite was reconstructed, and a mechanical "guard" instantly appeared at the acute angle from nowhere. Furthermore, when shifting from standby mode to the activation state, a dazzling light blade of concentrated Mana grew in the empty space.

The length of the blade was about one meter. Since appropriate adjustments had hardly been carried out, it was a normal Shining Type Armament(Lux) Seeing that, Julis also took out her activation tool from the holder at the waist of her uniform, and activated her Shining Type Armament(Lux) In fact, unlike Ayato's, it was a rapier of a thin flexible light.

"Well, are you ready?"

While elegantly posing her fine sword, Julis's eyes fixed upon Ayato.

In reality, the Shining Type Armament(Lux) was too light and was not Ayato's preference, but as it had come to this, he had no choice.

"...I, Amagiri Ayato accept the duel request of Julis."

Ayato held up his hand to the chest school badge, and muttered so with a sigh.

As proof of acceptance, Ayato's school badge once again shone red.

*

The <Star War Festival>(Festa) was a battle entertainment boasting the world's largest fan population.

The Artificial Water City -- Rikka, which floated in a huge crater-lake in North Kanto, was the stage known as Asterisk held once a year; the students of each of the six Academies held a weapon in an extreme competition for supremacy.

Even though, of course it did not mean that it was to the death.

In relation to those rules, it was stipulated in the agreement called Star Wars Charter(Stella Carta), but long story short, it said that "the person who destroys the school badge of their opponent wins". Although intentional cruelty was prohibited, if there was the purpose of weakening combat efficiency, attacks to any place other than the school badge were

permitted, and since weapons were used, there would naturally be injured people. There were occasionally also cases when it didn't end with just injuries.

Nonetheless, that young people still came from all over the world to this city was due to the fact that it was only here that they could hope to fulfill their wish.

And, the opportunity for them to fight was not only in the <Star War Festival>(Festa)If hot-blooded young men confident in their ability gathered in the same place, quite a few troubles would be expected to occur. In such cases, private wars (personal struggles) in conformity with rules were permitted in Asterisk.

That was the duel.

Though victory or defeat was decided by destroying the school badge as well as in the <Star War Festival>(Festa), the reinforced school badge contained the data processing functions within it, it also performed the duel application decision, the combat data transfer, and so on to the host computer.

Especially in a duel between students belonging to the same Academy, given that the rank would change depending on the issue (victory or defeat), there was a meaning more than just a private battle.

Julis herself fought successfully through many duels and had obtained the position of fifth ranked.

But for Julis, the young boy in front of her -- she could not determine at all the ability of Amagiri Ayato.

"Come into bloom -- White Firebloom of the Sharp Spear(Longiflorum)!"

When Julis swung the fine sword like a baton, spears of huge pale flames manifested along the arc. The flame which carried the shape of the trumpet lily, just like that with the momentum like a rocket were flying to pierce through Ayato.

"Argh!"

Though Ayato somehow parried it with the sword as a shield, the shock sent him wildly flying.

Although he barely took a defensive position, his breathing increased considerably.

"Oho, that newcomer isn't bad at all."

"He endures the flames of that Princess well. Well, his skill is so so."

"Hmm, I think that he's fairly skilled."

"He's not so bad. But he's not so good, either."

"Isn't the Princess going easy on him?"

To the voice of such gallery, Julis slightly frowned.

She was not going easy on him at all. But that didn't also mean she was fighting at full strength; she was seriously fighting her opponent.

In fact, no matter how one looked at it, Julis was the one predominant. On the other hand, Ayato, who was defending since the beginning, could not even decently get close to her.

Since it was Julis's basic tactic to suppress her opponent with overwhelming firepower, while keeping her distance, one could only say it was all according to the plan.

This fine sword *<Aspera Spina>* was to the bitter end for checks when it came to close range combat.

--However, Julis in question felt a strong sense of incongruity. She did not know what it was. She just knew that something did not feel right.

It might be a fact that she was the one having the upper hand, but his response was somehow dull. And Ayato, even if barely, fully dodged all the attacks of Julis.

For an instant, she thought that Ayato might be going easy on her, but seeing his figure, which greatly gasped for breath, she reconsidered that it did not seem to be an acting.

She was feeling a sense of incongruity, and yet at the same time her interest was perked, even if only a little.

Surveying his figure again, there was still the boyish innocence left and his features looked good in his own way.

Though he had a somewhat slender physique, looking at his agility, she understood that he was well trained.

Even though they were fighting, his brown eyes were calm, and Ayato wore a slightly easygoing atmosphere. One might say that he was carefree.

"Errr, Julis...-san? Will you soon forgive me?"

While finally catching his breath and lowering his eyebrows, Ayato raised both his hands.

"Julis is fine. So, may I take that as a declaration of surrendering intentionally?"

"Well, that is... No, to begin with, I had no intention of fighting since the beginning."

"Well, I don't mind it, but in that case, do you want to be slowly and carefully roasted as a pervert by me, or do you after all want to hand it to the vigilance committee of the girl's dormitory? By the way, the underwear thief who was caught by the vigilance committee the other day was only able to speak about the result of the 'Punishment', and after leaving the room also seemed to suffer from a mental condition."

"...I think I will do my best a bit longer."

Ayato set up the sword again while having a stiff smile.

It's fine like this.

At this rate, even Julis won't be satisfied with this.

'I must ascertain the real nature of that sense of incongruity at all costs'. Making up her mind so, Julis concentrated her Star-Power(Prana)The Star-Power(Prana) was the root of the power of the <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella). It was something like an invisible aura, but one could raise his offensive or defensive abilities by concentrating it. And for the <Witch>(Strega) or <Magician>(Danchi) like Julis, it was also an energy necessary for the activation of their ability.

In fact, due to the nature of their ability, <Witch>(Strega) or <Magician>(Danchi) must use their Star-Power(Prana) in their ability, the ratio of the Star-Power(Prana) to invest in defense by all means would

lower, and in hand-to-hand combat, that also tended to become a weak point and thus disadvantageous.

But, such a thing, unless one got closer, was a resolved problem.

"Come into bloom -- Six-Petal Burst Firebloom(Amaryllis)!"

'I won't miss this time.'

As a huge fire ball appeared before Julis, the gallery stirred.

It was the same technique she used to kick out Ayato from her room, but it was twice as big this time.

"That's not good! It's her best move!"

"Wai-, it's not a joke!"

"Retreat, retreat!"

Even if one was caught and injured, it would be of course at their own risk. The gallery hastily retreated back further.

Julis, without looking at such curious onlookers, instantly calculated the most optimal trajectory and released the fire ball. Though Ayato bent his waist and stood ready, just before he dodged, Julis tightly clenched her fist.

"Explode!"

"...!"

Upon command, the fireball exploded in front of Ayato's eyes.

Even if it was difficult to make it hit directly, it would be impossible to completely dodge it if the explosion occurred at this distance. If caught in this explosion at point-blank range, <Starpulse Generation>(Genestella) or not, he would not be able to move for a while.

The visibility was lost due to the raging of flame. While protecting her face from the thunderous blast, Julis was convinced of her victory.

--However.

"Amagiri Dragon Arts First Sword Fighting Skill -- Twin Water Dragons!"

As what one would think looked like a sword flash flashed, the flame petals were crosswise torn up.

"Wha.... Don't tell me, the Falling Stars Arts(Meteor Arts)?"

The Falling Stars Arts(Meteor Arts) was a skill which temporarily raised the output of the Shining Type Armament(Lux) by pouring the Star-Power(Prana) into the Mana Dite.

It was officially known as "over-excitation total response phenomenon", but it was not something that could be learnt in a day.

A suitable training, and above all thorough adjustments of the Shining Type Armament(Lux) were required.

If it was pulled off with a Shining Type Armament(Lux) just borrowed --

The next moment when Julis felt something close to shiver, a black shadow which appeared from the break of the flame shortened the distance in one breath.

When she recognized that the shadow was Ayato, he had already jumped into her bosom.

It was an incredible speed. At least, it was in another dimension compared to his movements up to now.

--For an instant, Ayato had a feeling that something like spark of light was scattered around him, but he could not be concerned about that.

"Y-You!"

Julis who reflexively tried to attack, was struck by Ayato's sharp voice.

"Get down!"

Before Julis understood what was going on, she was pushed down.

To the face of Ayato, who got close the distance as to take a breath, her heart leapt.

The light that dwelt in those eyes was earnest as if it was a different person.

"Y-You, what are you...!"

Still, raising voice of protest -- she unintentionally opened her eyes wide.

At the place where Julis was standing until now, there was a shining arrow stuck into the ground.

It was not a physical item. It was something created by a Shining Type Armament(Lux)The Shining Type Armament(Lux) temporarily concentrated Mana, and generated a blade or a bullet. The maintained weapon did not have any problem with the generation within the activation tool like a sword; in case of ranged weapons, it could not hold for long once fired. It became particles of light and faded away before her eyes.

"What are you doing?"

It was obviously an attack aimed at Julis.

It was probably a planned surprise attack under the cover of the explosion. In fact, whatever had been shooting from wherever, it must have not been noticed by anyone at that time. Though extremely reluctant, if Ayato hadn't saved her, it would have had completely succeeded.

"What am I doing?...I don't want to hear that from the person who was shooting at me."

Ayato answered, as troubled.

"Not that! What expressly with me --"

As she said up to there, realization struck.

Someone's hand had grabbed the developing bulges of Julis with all his might.

In fact, it was not anyone.

Since now there could not be only anyone, but Ayato who bent over as he tightly hugged Julis, he would inevitably be the owner of that hand.

As soon as she realized it, Julis's face dimly dyed red.

"...Ah."

Ayato who also later realized, hurriedly jumped back and lowered his head.

"So-Sorry! No, errr, I didn't have such an intention at all!"

It was a *deja vu*.

"Oh! What that bastard, he pushed down the princess!"

"Hugh! He has guts!"

"It's a passionate approach."

The gallery who came back without anyone noticing got excited at its own convenience.

That again enflamed Julis's anger.

"Y-Y-Y-You...!"

In response to Julis's anger, flame flowed around her.

She could not control her Star-Power(Prana) because of excessive anger.

Ayato without being able to voice his defense, was only able to frantically shake his head.

--And.

"Yes, yes, we will leave it as that."

Together with a calm, profound voice, a dry slap rang out.

Chapter 2 - War-Academy City

"Although we at Seidokan Academy respect the right of students to engage in duels, unfortunately, in this instance, things must end here."

Speaking as she came forth from within the crowd of onlookers was a young woman with dazzling blond hair.

She possessed a calm and collected bearing, and a beauty which, while different in style, was no less stunning than Julis'.

If one were to make a comparison, Julis would be likened unto a rose, blooming in gracious artistry. This young lady's appearance, in contrast, spoke of the serene tranquility of water's depths.

"...Claudia. By what authority do you stand in my way?"

"Why, under my authority as student council president of Seidokan Academy, of course."

The young lady, apparently named Claudia, revealed a light smile, and raised her hand to reveal the school badge she held within.

"By the authority bestowed upon me as the chief representative of the Red Lotus, I hereby annul this duel between Julis Alexia van Riessfeld and Amagiri Ayato."

Julis and Ayato's school badges, which had been glowing with a red light, now ceased to do so.

"Well, no harm, no foul, right, Amagiri Ayato-kun?"

"Mm..."

It seemed the storm had safely passed.

Ayato wiped the sweat from his forehead and sighed heavily.

"My thanks, um...President-san?"

"That's right. I'm the student council president of Seidokan Academy, Claudia Enfield. It's a pleasure."

Reaching out to take the hand extended to him, Ayato returned her handshake.

Seeing Claudia from this closer distance, she truly was a captivating presence.

As for what about her was so captivating, well...simply put, it was that overly abundant bosom of hers, which strained at her uniform.

That said, this was hardly the time to be making comparisons to Julis.

Indeed, Julis wore a distinctly dissatisfied expression, clearly unhappy with Claudia's ruling.

"Even if you are the student council president, barring some greater reason, you still don't have the right to interfere in a duel."



"Of course I have a reason. He's a transfer student, right? Even if he's already registered his information and had his emblem authenticated,

there's still one last procedure he hasn't yet finished. More strictly speaking, Amagiri Ayato-kun is not yet an official student of Seidokan Academy," Claudia explained, smiling broadly.

"Only those who are students may engage in a duel. Accordingly, this duel is invalid. Any complaints?"

"Gu...!"

Julis bit her lips in frustration.

Given her reaction, with no verbal response forthcoming, it was evident she agreed the argument held merit.

"Good. Now that we're all clear on the matter, I'd like to invite everyone to please depart. If you linger here for too long, you'll be late for class."

At these words, the crowd broke off into small groups, and wandered off.

A handful of students were clearly dissatisfied with the abrupt conclusion to the duel, though they could find no point on which to refute Claudia's decision.

"Ah!"

Suddenly, Ayato remembered the sniping from the duel just now.

It was probable that the student who had sniped Julis was even now fleeing the scene of the crime, hidden amongst the crowd. Even though he was hardly familiar with the rules and customs of his new school, this sort of despicable act still wasn't something he could simply ignore.

Allowing the culprit to simply disappear would be anything but wise.

"Um, please wait..."

Ayato was ready to shout when he was interrupted by a pat on the shoulder from Julis.

"Pretend you didn't see anything. This time, whoever it was got off easy."

Julis slowly shook her head, a wry smile on her lips.

"Moreover, as a Page One, suffering an ambush like that is hardly unexpected."

"Ugh. It's truly unfortunate, but this kind of thing isn't all that rare. That said, this time, they've really gone too far. A third party taking advantage of a duel to sneak in an attack is something unforgivable. I'll ask the disciplinary committee to look into it. Once we catch the culprit, they'll be dealt with harshly."

At these words from Claudia, Ayato was taken by surprise.

That meant, after all, that Claudia had clearly seen the sneak attack just now.

Even given the number of onlookers who had watched the duel, evidently not a one had noticed the attack.

Perhaps the only one who hadn't had their gaze captured by Julis' fiery explosions was this young maiden.

"Er, on that note...Regarding just now, um...thank you."

Julis turned to Ayato with an apologetic look.

She seemed to be referring to the sniping during their duel.

"Oh, well, putting that aside for the moment...You're not mad?"

Even though unforeseen circumstances had forced his hand, the fact remained that he'd pushed Julis down; that, he couldn't deny.

Remembering the soft sensation in his hand, Ayato inquired with fear, causing Julis to blush and avert her gaze.

"Well, I can't say I'm not the least bit upset, but...you definitely saved me."

It seemed that Julis was quite an earnest person.

Although her expression revealed that it wasn't quite so easy to let things go, she bowed her head.

"I'm very aware that what happened was unavoidable."

Things were progressing rather differently than when he'd returned her handkerchief.

Truth be told, Ayato was at his limit simply holding back her fireball; there simply was no time to think up an alternative method. Even if Prana was

capable of raising one's defensive abilities, it wasn't to the point of being able to shrug off a sneak attack like the one she'd undergone.

"That's why, just this once, I owe you one."

"Owe...?"

"That's right. Doesn't that make things much simpler?"

That certainly was easy to understand, but it was also a decidedly dispassionate way of dealing with things.

"I see you still haven't changed. Honestly."

Claudia's tone of voice revealed a certain distaste.

"If you ask me, you really should try to be a bit more straightforward."

"Don't worry about it. I'm pretty straight as it is, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future."

"Hmm...I seem to remember a certain someone struggling to find a partner, no?"

"Ugh...that's, um..."

Julis gaze fell as she mumbled.

Her reaction was an answer in itself.

"The Phoenix Star Warrior Festival(Phoenix) registration deadline is in two weeks. That doesn't leave a whole lot of time."

"I-I know! I just need to find someone before then, and it'll be fine!"

Julis promptly flipped an about-face, and stormed off.

"Honestly."

Claudia's gaze followed Julis into the distance, looking all the part of a mother watching a rebellious child.

"So, the significance behind why this century has been nicknamed 'The Calamitous Century'. This is due in part to the physical effects of the meteor shower(Ember Tears), which visited unprecedented destruction

upon this world. For three days and three nights, meteorites rained down from the sky, changing the world in drastic ways. The nations which had previously held power fell, giving rise to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, and a change in societal notions of ethics. The meteorites further resulted in the inception of a new kind of human, able to exert influence over mana - that is to say, the Starpulse Generation. This led to the creation of new scientific institutions devoted to the study of mana, which, by leveraging the techniques of meteoric engineering, has grown by leaps and bounds. Regardless of whether these changes are beneficial or not, nevertheless, within the history of man, the Ember Tears stands as a monument of great change."

Passing by the classroom, an older teacher could be heard giving instruction.

"Furthermore, according to current schools of thought, the notion that the Ember Tears did not consist of ordinary meteorites is now a predominant theory. All observatories surveying the phenomenon have noted the release of a particular aerosol being produced as the meteorites made contact with the Earth's atmosphere. As for what this portends..."

The droning monotone made for an effective tranquilizer, needing only to enter one's ear before quickly sending one off to count sheep. Indeed, a quick glance within the classroom revealed the majority of students lying asleep on their desks.

"It's pretty early to be in class. Class shouldn't have started yet, right?"

"That's right. These students are taking extra lessons."

"This early and already in extra lessons..."

How unfortunate.

"After all, our school focuses on both civil and martial paths. You'd best remember this."

Leading Ayato along the path to the student council room, Claudia turned with a smile.

Unlike the classical architecture of the girl's dormitory, Seidokan Academy's design is much more modern.

The university, high school, and junior high buildings enclose a communal courtyard. Of these three, the high school enrollment was the largest, and subsequently, so was its building.

"Oh, that reminds me. Ayato-kun, you and I are the same age, so feel free to relax a little."

"Huh? Wait, that means...the student council president is just a first-year?"

Her calm and cool temperament completely belied her age.

"That's odd...The student council president...?"

It's currently June. If she was indeed a first-year like Ayato, then she should have entered school but two months prior.

Although admittedly he hadn't the slightest clue what the process for selecting the student council president entailed, but to have risen to such an elevated position in such a short time was nonetheless staggering.

"You're right. My term as president began during junior high; this is already my third term," Claudia calmly explained as they made their way through the hallway, brilliantly illuminated by the rays of sunlight pouring through the glass panes.

It wasn't the case that the different school levels held no autonomy, but rather that the student council of Seidokan Academy was a single body drawn from all three levels. Resultantly, among the members of the student council could also be found those who were at the junior high level and those who were at the university level.

"Unbelievable..."

"That's why, please just address me by my name."

"So that's how it is, Claudia-san."

"Claudia. Anything else is unnecessary."

"Er, that's a little bit..."

Given the circumstances, it wasn't like he could do much else, but for Ayato to directly use the first name of a girl he had just met was still something he was rather hesitant to do.

"Claudia."

"That's what I mean...that's...."

"Clau~di~a~"

"...Alright, I understand already. Claudia."

Contrasting her appearance, she appeared to be quite stubborn indeed.

Having lost out to her mulishness, Ayato had no choice but to give in and address his student council president with her given name. Claudia narrowed her eyes in delight.

"Well then, please call me Ayato...even if it's a little embarrassing, to be sure."

"Got it, Ayato."

"Is it really fine not to use any honorifics?"

"That's assuredly not the case. Just chalk it up to my personality."

"Personality?"

"Indeed. I harbor quite a sly personality, so I make sure to leave a good first impression on others. Afterwards, I influence them little by little."

From the very beginning, Claudia looked nothing so much like a warm, caring mother, so digesting what'd just said necessarily took Ayato some time.

"...A sly personality?"

"Just so. Deep within my heart, a dark something is boiling over, almost like a black hole, wreaking havoc. It's so black, it's even darker than black honey."^[2]

That certainly is dark.

"That said, would you like to see for yourself?"

"Huh?"

Having thus spoken, Claudia gripped the bottom of her blouse, and began to roll it up.

"Wah!? Wa-wait just a moment!"

Catching a glimpse of that exquisite abdomen, Ayato frantically turned away.

Of course, Claudia never intended to reveal anything more.

"Hahaha, I'm just playing. Such a cute reaction."

Claudia laughed delightedly, covering her mouth with her hand.

This made it abundantly clear just what she meant by a "sly personality".

"-Alright, we're here. Please, come in."

It'd taken them some time to reach the student council room, located on the top floor of the high school building. Looking more carefully, it seemed all the rooms on the top floor were related to the student council in some way.

Using her school badge, Claudia authenticated herself at the door, which slid open to reveal a vast and spacious room which felt a bit much for a student council room.

The floor of the entryway was covered in a dark brown leather rug. A depiction of Seidokan Academy's school grounds was hung on the wall. Placed in front of the large window, with room to spare, was a heavy oaken conference desk with matching chairs. Simply put, it looked for all the world like the boardroom of a large corporation.

Claudia sat down at the head of the table with a practiced ease, placing her hands together, she spoke once more.

"Well then, once more...Welcome to Seidokan Academy, Ayato."

Having looked at Ayato this entire time, Claudia now broke eye contact to turn to face the window.

"And...welcome to Rikka, the Asterisk City."

Ayato followed her in looking out over the city from their high vantage point, a neat and tidy cityscape filling his gaze.

Floating atop the crater-lake in North Kanto, left by an immense meteorite, lay the artificial-island city. In the center of its hexagonal layout sat the central district, with one of the six schools reaching out in each direction, giving one the impression of a large snowflake. The name of this city, Snowflake(Rikka), was rooted in this fact.

Each school had its own district, with a large road leading up to the school itself, the architecture of which resulted in a star shape, or more precisely, a hexagram(asterisk)Granted, the origin of this name was something that had to be seen to be understood for those students who journeyed from around the world to be here.

"We of Seidokan Academy have but one expectation of you, the special invitee transfer student, and that is victory."

Looking down upon the city, she continued, "Defeat St. Garrardsworth Academy, subdue Allekant Academy, subjugate the World Dragon(Gerron) Seventh Institute, overpower Le Wolfe Black Institute, and triumph over Queen Veil Girl's Academy. That is to say, to obtain victory during the Star Warrior Festival(Festa)."

"...Um-"

Ayato could only scratch his head and frown.

"I'm sorry. I'll be honest; I have no interest in any of that."

The truth of the matter was that each school was supported from behind the scenes by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Their power, superior to the now fallen nations of times past, was sufficient even to warp and alter the law. Whether it be wealth, position, or prestige - nothing was beyond reach.

To be certain, of the students gathered to this Asterisk City, a full half were here for the express purpose of realizing such dreams.

The remaining half, namely those students wielding the special powers of the Starpulse Generation, were eager to test themselves, hoping at least once to fight to the very limits of their ability. For these students, there was but one place in this world where they could fight to their hearts' content.

Nonetheless, Ayato fell within neither of these two camps.

"I know. I'm aware you don't feel anything in particular about this sort of thing, which is why you've rejected our invitation once already."

Signaling the end of this phase of their conversation, Claudia turned her chair to face Ayato once more.

"The fact remains, however, that our school's performance in the Festa these past years has been anything but stellar. Last season, we placed

fifth in the overall rankings. With that said, the sixth-ranked Queen Veil are so ranked by design only, the official rankings notwithstanding. The reality of things is that we are currently last. This is not a situation we can allow to continue; for this purpose, we need every talented individual we can get our hands on."

Although the Festa is described as a single competition, in truth, it is composed of three separate parts.

In the summer of the first year is the partner battle Phoenix Star Warrior Festival(Phoenix), in the fall of the second year is a team battle, Gryphon Star Warrior Festival(Gryps), and finally in the winter of the third year is the individually fought Dragon King Star Warrior Festival(Lindvolus)Those who perform well are able to have their scores substituted in place of their traditional school grades; their final point accumulation at the end of the Lindvolus becomes their grade. Thus three years of grades can summed up by this one cycle.

As Claudia has just mentioned, Seidokan Academy's performance these last few cycles has consistently lingered near the bottom.

"Students have the opportunity to participate in the Festa three times. Unfortunately, looking at it in another light, our best students only have three chances at most to participate. To be frank, our current numbers are inadequate."

Students may register for the Festa when they are between the ages of 13 and 22, a period of 10 years. During this time, they may, of their own free will, choose to participate in any Festa, even if only a part thereof.

For example, there are those students who will participate in all three Festa segments in one cycle, departing at the end of the three year cycle, as well as those who, in their nine allotted years, will opt to take part in the Lindvolus only.

The more excellent students, the better. Taking this attitude, each of the six schools spares no effort in seeking out the very best and brightest, leading students from all around the world to gather here.

Free tuition, living stipends, sponsored equipment; each of the six schools had its own methods for attracting students. From the point of view of these schools, these special invitees were to be had no matter what.

"On that note, why was I invited to come here? Although it's a little strange to be saying this myself, but I don't think there's anything particularly noteworthy about me."

"That's certainly the case. Because of your utter lack of a reputation, I faced quite the opposition pushing your name through."

"Ehh? You're the one who recommended me!?"

The majority of those who were sought out as special invitees were those who had performed well in the Festa. The exceptions to the rule were the Witches(Strega) and the Magicians(Dante). However, these individuals were duty-bound to heed the will of their respective nations and were not free to escape the fate of being selected.

When it came to this point, from the time when he was young, Ayato had been raised as a practitioner in a kenjutsu dojo, and had never before participated in the Festa.

"Just so; it was I who forced the school to admit you. At that time I was truly appreciative for the position of student council president. Three cheers for power!"

"...don't you mean force?"

"If you'd rejected my invitation, that would have been rather embarrassing for me. Your change of heart was quite fortuitous."

"Who said anything about a change of heart?"

Ayato shrugged as Claudia narrowed her eyes.

"If that's the case, then why did you accept my invitation?"

"..."

Turning serious, Ayato placed his hands on the table, and looked Claudia in the eye.

"Claudia, the news that my sister - Amagiri Haruka - attended this school...Is it true?"

"Hmm, well, how to put this?"

Claudia directly accepted his gaze, extending her forefinger.

"All I know is a rumor, that she once attended this school. All information regarding her stay here has since been deleted by an unknown party."

"Deleted...Is that really possible?"

"Generally speaking, of course not."

"Even for the student council president?"

"Even someone in this position is hardly omnipotent...although, if it were someone a step above that, that's another matter entirely."

Continuing to stare at Claudia's bitter smile, Ayato's serious expression didn't fade.

A position even higher than the student council president, in other words, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation.

"There are no records of 'her' ever having taken part in the Festa, nor is 'her' name recorded in the Battle Omnicron(Named Cards). To be frank, whether or not she ever attended this school is unknown. Assuming she did indeed attend here, that was but some five years prior. There are both students and faculty here who have been here this entire time, and yet none remember her. The strange point is this, though."

"Any possibility the competition records were altered?"

"None. For starters, hiding someone means pulling the wool over the eyes of the hundreds of millions, if not billions, of fans who watch the Festa. Each Festa is broadcast live all over the world, and the Named Cards are updated in real-time, as well as online. Even small incidents like the occasional intra-school duel are immediately captured by the media, and immediately spread to every corner of the city. Take, for example, the duel between you and Julis; it's already on the web."

"You mean..."

Almost as if to interrupt Ayato's words, Claudia operated the computer beside her.

A screen dropped down, depicting a young woman.

"!"

Ayato's eyes opened wide.

"This is all we've been able to recover. She entered five years ago, departing after just half a year for personal reasons. Her name, birthdate, background; almost nothing remains."

Nonetheless, for Ayato, that was already more than enough.

This was it! Without a doubt!

"...How did you come by this, Claudia?"

In order to recover lost information, one obviously had to be first aware it had been discarded. However, of this student, neither records nor memories remained.

That being the case, how did Claudia know?

"I apologize. I'm afraid I can't reveal that. Do you not trust me?"

"Oh, no, that's not what I meant at all," Ayato frantically responded.

As a student council president, she definitely had her own sources of intelligence.

It went without saying that such things were confidential.

"It's just that, the way I see it, regardless of what's occurred since, it's almost a surety that 'she' is no longer here. If your reason for coming is her..."

As Claudia spoke, she grew increasingly flustered, however, Ayato's expression quickly returned to normal, and he shook his head.

"Thank you. Don't worry about it; my reason for coming wasn't just because of her."

In response, Claudia inquired further with a questioning gaze.

"Then...why did you choose this school?"

"Hmm-"

Ayato folded his arms, lost in thought, before answering with a smile.

"If I had to say, it's probably because I would like to discover a goal to seek after."

"How terribly abstract."

"Eh, really? I would've thought most students answer similarly."

"Ahh...I'm more and more intrigued by the moment."

Claudia felt that Ayato sought to muddle the issue with his answer.

The truth, however, was that he'd honestly tried his best to respond.

If it was at this school, he sincerely felt he'd be able to find a goal worthy of striving toward.

If his sister truly was here-

"Oh! That's right; I almost forgot to tell you something."

Clapping her hands together, Claudia suddenly cut in.

"Our special invitee students, aside from waived fees and the like, have several other privileges. One of these is priority access to the school's Pure Star Type Armaments(Ogre Lux)."

"Ogre Lux refers to those which use a special type of mana dite, right?"

"That's correct. They use an Ulm mana dite."

Among the meteorites that had fallen to the Earth during the Ember Tears, accompanying the unknown element now known as mana was also the unique ore, mana dite. Mana dite was the crystallization of the mana element, and recent advances had allowed for its artificial production.

Meteoric engineering research into mana and mana dites had paved the way for new industry, not the least of which was centered around the ability to employ the mana in mana dites as an energy source for weapons, the Shining Type Armaments(Lux)When activated, Lux weapons materialize and focus mana, producing a blade of light (there are also arrow and bullet forms).

The might conferred by Lux weapons exceeded those of existing weapons, and furthermore, carried other beneficial properties (for example, a Lux gun needs no ammunition). For this reason, for the most part, Lux weapons have since replaced traditional weaponry. They have become popular to the point that they now see such widespread use as weaponry, self-defense tools, and even children's toys.

Among the types of mana dite is one of exceedingly high purity, and equally rare. These are the so-called Ulm mana dites, which form the core

of the Ogre Lux weapons. Their capabilities are incomparable to those of normal Lux weaponry, but are rumored to be even more difficult to control than the unique abilities of the Strega and Dante.

The vast majority of Ogre Lux weaponry belongs to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, although a select number are provided to each school for research purposes.

"If you'd prefer not to utilize an Ogre Lux, then of course, we won't force you. They do carry some side effects, after all. That's the 'price' of using something like that. What do you think?"

"I've heard you first need to verify compatibility?"

All users of an Ogre Lux, when drawing out their weapon's power, experience some sort of change.

If rumors are to be believed, then Ogre Lux weapons are self-aware, and choose their own owners.

"More than that, you should say it's the most important factor. Here at Seidokan Academy, the minimum requirement is an 80% compatibility rating. Any lower than that, and we can't accommodate the wishes of the student in loaning out the item."

"Hmm..."

Putting aside for a second whether or not he was interested, having to go through procedures to borrow the item in question each and every time struck Ayato as troublesome; in any case, to begin with, he had no idea if he was compatible or not.

Knowing Ayato had his own thoughts on the matter, and seeing his wavering expression, Claudia was mindful of his concerns.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, this isn't something I've been able to verify, so take it with a grain of salt. Truth be told, the requirement to register in order to use an Ogre Lux is a little suspicious."

"What do you mean?"

"The management of Ogre Lux weaponry is necessarily strict. But using 'who is currently borrowing what Lux' records seems almost a pretext for

something else. More specifically, it's almost like by using verified combat data, they're trying to isolate that combat data which has no associated registration information."

"By that you mean...unregistered Lux use?"

"Well, if the record's been altered, yes. I think the probability is quite high. These records are housed within the database of the management department, which has accumulated untold amounts of Ogre Lux combat data. As its inner workings are far from clear, it's impossible to eliminate the possibility of tampering."

"Let me guess, that data remnant is from five years previous?"

"Exactly."

Ayato sighed heavily.

"If that's how it is, it seems best that I take a look myself."

According to this reasoning, the probability that his sister had used an Ogre Lux is quite high. If that was the case, he wanted to confirm with his own eyes the Lux weapon she'd used.

"I understand. I'll look into this more thoroughly and then notify you of my findings. For now, please use this."

What Claudia extended to him was a Lux activation tool.

"This is a traditional sword-style Lux. It's already been configured with your personal settings, but if you'd like to make any modifications, please pay the Equipment Division a visit."

"Ah, thank you. Oh, that reminds me."

Seeing this Lux reminded Ayato of the one he'd borrowed earlier, the one that a member of the crowd had thrown for him during the duel with Julis.

"This is troubling, how do I return this...?"

Ayato pulled out the Lux from earlier, but unfortunately, as expected, there was not a name engraved there.

"Oh, don't worry about it. If it's just that, the school just hands them out."

"Really? That's pretty generous."

This kind of combat-refined Lux is of course not cheap. Nevertheless, when compared with the potential benefits that came from the Festa, they were nothing indeed.

"Switching topics for a second, I just thought of something. Mind if I ask?"

"Sure, go ahead."

"You'd mentioned 'one last procedure'...what was it?"

"Oh, that. Well-"

Saying that, Claudia suddenly stopped.

Stopping to contemplate for a moment, she quickly glanced around.

"...Is something the matter?"

"Oh, not at all! It's nothing like that."

Claudia waved her hands frantically, giving off an appearance utterly unlike that of just earlier.

Her cheeks seemed to have taken on a slight reddish tint, and her gaze was lowered.

"Er, how do I say this, would you mind closing your eyes for just a moment?"

"Alright."

Why would this last procedure require closing one's eyes?

Despite this thought, Ayato had no intention of investigating further, and obediently shut his eyes.

He heard the slight whine of chair wheels, and not long after-

"-Ei!"

Ayato felt a slight impact on his back.

Though he was slightly taken by surprise, it wasn't like it'd hurt; in fact, the sensation was rather soft.

Or rather, wasn't it too soft?

"Huh?"

There's no way, Ayato thought, as he opened his eyes. Opened to his gaze were a pair of hands, enclosed around his abdomen. In other words, he'd been hugged from behind.

"Wah! Cl-Claudia!?"

"Ufufu."

The unbelievably soft yet overwhelming mass pressed into Ayato from behind.

Ayato, anxious, was unsure what he should do.

If there was anything he could do, that is.

"...Finally...Finally I get to see you..."

The bits and pieces of muttered words he heard were faint, but spoke clearly of long repressed nostalgia.



Although the feeling was indisputably conveyed, Ayato could only shake these thoughts from his mind.

"Claudia..?"

He received no response.

Ayato briefly considered turning to look behind him, though, fact of the matter was, he was completely at a loss.

More importantly, someone who left such a strong impression on others such as Claudia could hardly be forgotten, right?

For some indeterminate length, that moment in time simply continued, the two of them unmoving and silent. Finally, the two arms released him.

"-Fufu. I'm just teasing. Were you surprised?"

Ayato finally turned to look, finding a thoroughly genuine smile awaiting him.

It was just a gut feeling, but he felt like he'd lost the opportunity to inquire further.

"...Getting suddenly hugged like that from behind; is there anyone who wouldn't be surprised?"

"Don't misunderstand. That's not something I'd do for just anyone. I'm quite pure, you know?"

Claudia covered her mouth with her hand, and coupled with her earlier statement, it was difficult to tell which parts were just a joke.

"So?"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell me that was the so-called 'last procedure'?"

Ayato forcibly brought things back on topic.

Disregarding everything else that had occurred, this was the primary reason Ayato had come, after all.

"Ohh...that. Yeah, that was a lie."

"...Lie?"

Ayato felt his jaw drop.

"Because it's easier this way~"

From the looks of things, Claudia didn't feel the least bit of remorse.

"You're already a part of this school, procedures and what not, it's all done already. It's just that, in that circumstance, this was the most effective way to handle things. Julis is quite the zealous person, so I can guarantee that if it wasn't 'a violation of school regulations', she'd undoubtedly have continued that duel."

"But, but that's..."

"Oh, do you mean to say that you would have preferred to continue?"

"..."

Of course that wasn't the case.

"If things had continued down that course, what would you have done? Neither I nor the school have any desire of witnessing such things."

"..."

Well, if nothing else, what Claudia had done had been for his sake, after all. While her actions weren't quite to the degree of "ruthless", her way of doing things definitely differed from her appearance.

Nor could hide nor hair be found of the weak and delicate Claudia who had hugged him just now.

"Now then, class is about to start, so let's end things here. If there's anything you need, don't hesitate to ask. If there's anything I can do to help, it'd be my pleasure."

Smiling beautifully, Claudia sent Ayato off with her gaze.

"Ah- Well then, this is the special transfer student Amagiri Ayato. Please get along well with everyone."

What a careless introduction.

Because of their new environment, teachers usually placed extra emphasis on caring for transfer students; in this instance, however, not the slightest hint of concern could be felt.

Ayato turned to gaze at the woman by his side, the homeroom teacher of Year 1 Class 3, Yatsuzaki Kyouko, whose only reaction was to say, "It's your turn now."

She was rather tall, with a gaze best described as penetrating...or perhaps ferocious, and a tone and an attitude utterly unsuited to being a teacher.

That said, that was not what was most surprising, which would be the nailed bat she held in her hands. Well-worn, and dyed a deep scarlet, its forbidding presence discouraged further inquiry.

"Hey, hurry it up."

"Ah, right away! Um, I'm Amagiri Ayato. Pleased to meet all of you."

Ayato's introduction extended only as far as his name; perhaps he wasn't the talkative type.

Every gaze in the room centered on him.

There were students who were intrigued, students who couldn't care less, students who seemed to stare deeply, and students who were on guard.

Transfer students were always the subject of attention, but this was rather excessive.

Just one girl stared at Ayato with a complicated expression, the reasoning for which Ayato was only too aware.

"Seat, hmm...Ah, why don't you sit with the person you were playing with fire with. It just so happens to be empty, perfect."

"Who, who did you say was playing with fire with that guy?!"

The person Kyouko had referenced, Julis, stood up, her face reddening.

"Hmm, who other than you, Riessfeld? This morning, you were too unrestrained. As a member of the Top Twelve, you can't just rampage about whenever you feel like it. This is not Le Wolfe after all!"

"Gu..."

Julis reluctantly sat back down in her seat, located in the second row from the back.

Luckily, there were empty seats on either side of her.

"I'd never have guessed we'd be classmates."

"...I'm not laughing."

At Ayato's words, Julis could only sigh.

Not all that warm of a welcome, it seems.

"Even though lots of things happened earlier, in short, pleased to meet you."

Julis still had a few words for Ayato, so she turned to him to speak.

"I owe you, so when you need my help, I'll lend you a hand just once. Other than that, leave me alone."

Having said her piece, she abruptly turned away.

-After which...

"Haha, rejected."

From behind drifted over a comment half sympathetic, half exclamatory.

Ayato turned around. He saw a young man with lean facial features, a sympathetic expression on his face, extending a hand toward him.

"Well, you are dealing with the Princess, after all."

Ayato grasped the young man's hand, which he shook vigorously.

"My name's Yabuki Eishirou. We're roommates."

"Roommates...you mean in the dorms?"

"Yep. My room was intended for two people after all."

"My apologies. After having the room to yourself for so long, it must be a little cramped now."

"No worries."

Eishirou seemed to be quite the candid young man.

Though it wasn't immediately obvious while he was sitting, he ought to be a full head taller than Ayato. His attitude seemed rather childlike, but both his expression and his stature spoke of his maturity. His left cheek bore an obvious scar, giving a sense of unbalanced aesthetics.

"Anyway, if I'm going to have a roommate, I'm glad it's an interesting one."

"...I'm a pretty ordinary person, you know?"

"What're you talking about? The very first morning of your transfer, and already dueling one of the Top Twelve? What's more, daring to push down that Princess in front of that crowd of onlookers? There's no need for false modesty here."

Ayato felt he hadn't the slightest degree of false modesty, and if given the opportunity, would gladly take an hour or two to clear up the misunderstanding. Nevertheless, it appeared as if rumor had long since spread.

Accordingly, the second class ended, he found himself surrounded.

"Hey, Amagiri-kun, what happened at your previous school? Transferring in at this time means something must have happened right?"

"Also, why were you dueling the Princess? We still haven't received any information on that!"

"Nononono, what's important is, is it really okay to be that passionate about the Princess? Hmm? What do I mean? Wasn't that duel about ending your love in a blaze of glory? Or wait, maybe forbidden love?"

"Wait, wait! Rather than all that ridiculousness, what I want to know is your strategy for fighting the Princess! How'd you do it?"

"I never expected this."

The other group of students were separated by a wall of indifference.

"This is, of course, due to the Gruene Rose's lenience toward a newcomer."

"Honestly. Whether it be personal background or reactionary speed, this is far in excess of what passes for normal in this city. Relatively speaking, this might be even harder than making it into the Named Cards."

"Why's someone like that a special invitee? Not that it matters one way or another."

And so on and so forth.

It felt to Ayato as if class had continued without ceasing. By the end of the school day, he was exhausted in both heart and mind.

"Ugh..."

"It's been hard on you. It sure isn't fun being popular."

The light of the setting sun poured through the classroom windows, shining upon Ayato, collapsed upon his desk in exhaustion, and Eishirou, giving him a friendly pat on the back.

"Well, I've come to a realization through all of this."

"Of?"

"That I'm not the popular one; Julis is."

Ayato glanced at the seat by his side, exaggeratedly shrugging his shoulders.

The owner of that seat had vanished without trace the moment class ended.

"It wasn't that people were interested in me per se, but rather that they were curious about 'the one who'd dueled the Princess', right?"

"Hmm, not bad."

Eishirou applauded.

His expression revealed his esteem for Ayato's remark.

"The thing I don't get is this; if that's all they wanted, why not ask Julis directly?"

"If it was that easy, things wouldn't be like this. Haven't you noticed? That Princess isn't exactly friendly."

"...More or less, yes."

Thinking of the smile Julis had shown after having her handkerchief returned, Ayato wondered why she kept others at a distance.

"Well, who knows what the reason is, but it's a fact that she deliberately maintains a distance between herself and others. Moreover..."

"Um, just a moment. You've been saying 'the Princess' over and over; is that a nickname? It seems like everyone else was doing the same."

"Hrm, nickname or not, huh...Well, truth be told, she's an honest-to-goodness princess."

"...Huh?"

Ayato was sure he'd misheard.

"A princess? You mean like the kind in fairy tales?"

"Exactly. Getting cursed by an evil witch, saved by the kiss of a prince, forced into a political marriage, coming from a magical land, sold into slavery, and getting toyed with by tentacles, that kind of princess. Simply put, the daughter of a king."

Although the second half of that answer sounded rather strange to Ayato, he nonetheless understood.

"After the Ember Tears, the nations of Europe returned to being monarchies. While true control over both government and economics was grasped by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, they found it convenient to place puppet monarchs on the throne. The first princess of one of those countries, Lieseltania, is that Princess. Her full name is Julis Alexia Marie Florentia Renate van Riessfeld. Her name is recorded on Europe's list of royalty."

"Um...that was a little too detailed, don't you think?"

"Oh, this is just purchased information. Provided by the Newspaper Club, incidentally."

He smiled brazenly.

"Why was the Princess fighting in a place like that anyway? Normally, princesses should be more graceful."

Remembering the incident where he'd nearly been roasted alive, Ayato tilted his head in thought.

Julis indeed possessed elegant demeanor, august manner, and boldness - in excess.

"Who would have guessed you didn't know yourself? And here I was, thinking I'd get the inside scoop."

Eishirou wore a serious expression which seemed to say, "looks like my information was correct."

"She's decidedly lovely, fiercely strong, and a real princess to boot. It's obvious that she'd be the center of attention. Since joining our class last year, she hasn't just caught the eye of others; they stirred themselves into a fanatic fervor as her 'guards'. Not long ago, she issued them a command."

"...I can picture that all too easily."

"Anyway, do you know what it was she told them? 'Silence! I am not a work of art to be admired.'"

"...Again, all too easily imagined."

"The majority ran off, but as expected, this completely normal response left some very unhappy. The Princess responded by challenging each of them to a duel in turn, and one by one, defeating them handily. Not long after, the Princess soon achieved a position as one of the Top Twelve."

That was to be expected.

Having fought Julis himself, Ayato was very aware that her strength was anything but a sham. Even here at the War-Academy City, Asterisk, there were likely only a handful of individuals stronger than her.

"That's why, there's no one capable of approaching that Princess. Until today, there hasn't been a single person able to work up the courage to simply talk to her like that."

"Uh...how do I say this; she does have friends, right?"

"At least as far as I know, no, not a one. Oh, pardon me for just a moment."

Eishirou raised his hand to forestall further comment, before reaching into his pocket to withdraw his ringing phone.

"What's up, President?"

"Don't ask me 'what's up'! I told you already I wanted your article proofread and ready for printing first thing in the morning! What on Earth have you been doing!?"

In the space between them a window had opened, displaying a girl with shoulder-length hair snarling at full volume.

"Ah, sorry, something came up..."

"No excuses! Just get your ass over here within the next five minutes!"

As the window suddenly disappeared, Eishirou kneaded his forehead with a wry smile.

"...Well, that's how it is. If I don't head over, things won't go well for me."

"It's just about time for me to head back anyway."

"Let's meet back at the dorms then."

"Before that...Yabuki!"

Facing Eishirou, preparing to exit the classroom, Ayato tossed something to him.

"Ohh?"

Eishirou caught the item with a surprised look on his face. Inspecting it more carefully, he laughed.

"So you noticed."

"Thank you. If it wasn't for this, I'm sure things wouldn't have ended that simply."

What he'd thrown was a Lux activation tool.

It wasn't, however, the one he'd received from Claudia, but rather the one from this morning.

"How'd you know it was me?"

"Hmm? Oh, your voice."

Playing things down, Ayato replied mildly, but Eishirou's face lit up.

"In the middle of all of that, you still remember a single voice from that crowd so clearly?"

"Return what is owed. That's something my sister repeated time and again."

"...Hah! As I thought, you really are interesting!"

Eishirou shook with laughter.

"So, Amagiri, the duel from this morning...in actuality, you won, didn't you?"

"...Ehh, for the current me, I don't think that's possible."

This was not a lie.

"Hmm... 'the current you', is it?"

Satisfied with his answer, Eishirou left the room with a lively gait.

Ayato, now alone in the room, sighed heavily.

"This school is really more difficult than expected."

Chapter 3 - Noble Eyes

"Huh? Crap, I must have taken the wrong path."

Ayato had taken what he had originally supposed was a shortcut, cutting through the courtyard, only to find himself trapped behind a locked gate.

It looked like certain school entrances were locked once night fell.

Although the gate was quite tall, it wasn't to the degree that he couldn't make it over if he jumped. Still, remembering the incident from this morning, he decided to play it safe.

"Ah, whatever. It's not like I'm in a rush anyway."

Moreover, taking a walk was one of his admittedly few hobbies.

The central courtyard was larger than a mid-sized park, and all vegetation had been carefully trimmed.

Looking closely, semi-human robots with doll-like forms, replicants, were pruning the trees. Though it seemed military-use replicants were remote-controlled, the actions of ordinary replicants were automated, and thus both slow and limited to simple commands. These days, such acts of manual labor in harsh working environments were generally the purview of the replicants.

Though in the city Ayato had previously resided in, this was a sight rarely seen.

"...If that's the case, why'd you duel that newcomer!"

A young man's voice.

Only someone rather ill-mannered would be roaring in public like this, the air shaking at his volume.

(An argument, is it...?)

Ayato hid in the shadow of a nearby tree. Positioned in front of him was a pavilion, within which stood three male students. The most noticeable of the three was the one in the center, of large stature and, evident even from Ayato's location, an overbearing manner. The other two, one skinny and one slightly overweight, trailed slightly behind, almost like younger brothers.

The other party sat within, hidden from view.

At the circumstances, which looked primed to erupt at any moment, Ayato refused to turn a blind eye. Nonetheless, given both his role as a third party and his unfamiliarity with school customs, he felt it best to limit his actions to observation for the time being.

-However.

"Answer me, Julis!"

Upon hearing the familiar name, he unconsciously leaned out from behind the tree.



"I am under no obligation to answer you, Lester. Everyone has the privilege of dueling as we please."

"Of course, I'm the same."

Moving stealthily, Ayato caught a glimpse of a rose-haired girl seated within the pavilion.

It seemed like the tall male student, named Lester?, was arguing with Julis, and it seemed that sparks would fly at any moment.

It was a very volatile atmosphere.

"In the same way, we have the right to reject any duel in which we'd rather not take part. No matter how many times you ask, the answer is still no."

"And why is that?!"

"...It seems that you're incapable of understanding unless I tell you straight out."

Julis sighed heavily before rising to meet Lester's glare.

"To put it simply, I've already beaten you thrice. If we were to fight again, it'd just be a waste of my time."

"Next time, I'll win! How dare you always look down on others?! You haven't seen my real strength yet!"

"That's right, that's right! When Lester gets serious, no one's fit to be his opponent!"

The pudgy student standing behind Lester took the opportunity to cut in with a comment of his own.

"Then feel free to demonstrate - with someone else."

Julis unilaterally brought the conversation to a close by turning away.

"Wait! I'm not done yet...!"

Just as Lester reached out to take hold of Julis' shoulder, Ayato stepped out from behind the tree.

"Oh my, isn't this Julis? What a coincidence, meeting here."

"...What are you doing here?"

"Who are you?"

At Ayato's timing and words, too perfect to be truly be coincidence, Julis, Lester, and his two lackeys all frowned.

"Hahaha...It seems I took a wrong turn somewhere."

"Ah! Lester! That guy is the new transfer student!"

"What...!?"

Lester's glare, filled with provocation, pierced through Ayato.

Ayato, on the other hand, was completely calm as he spoke to Julis.

"Julis, this individual is...?"

"...Lester McPhail, ranked ninth in our school."

Julis folded her hands behind her back, a blank expression on her face.

"Oh, so you're also a Page One. That's amazing."

"..."

"Ah, right. I'm Amagiri Ayato; it's nice to meet you."

Although Ayato extended his left hand for a handshake, Lester pretended he hadn't seen it, opting instead to continue to stare daggers at him.

From up close, Lester's exaggerated stature was all the more apparent. He looked just about two meters tall, with broad shoulders and well-toned musculature.

The muscles of those in the Starpulse Generation were indeed different from others. In addition to the their increased effectiveness, they had the peculiar trait of not changing much in appearance even with training. Lester's well-defined muscles thus spoke to the degree of training they'd undergone.

His short, tawny hair stood on end and his facial features twisted in rage.

"You'd...You'd willingly duel someone like that, and yet won't accept my challenge...?"

Lester clenched his fists as his voice began to tremble with rage.

"Don't screw with me! You're going to suffer defeat at my hands! No matter what tricks you try!"

Lester's eyes had long ceased to take note of Ayato's presence.

Waving his hands, he approached Julis.

"Wait! Please wait Lester-san! Calm down...note where we are..."

Lester was heedless of the cries of his skinny compatriot.

Although Julis was of average height for a girl her age, that meant nothing in the face of Lester's frightening physique.

That notwithstanding, Julis retreated not one step, instead responding firmly and resolutely.

"That's impossible. Until you change that personality of yours, no different from a wild boar, that will never happen."

"Wha...How dare you!"

Though he seemed ready to explode, if he reacted on impulse in this situation, he'd only be validating Julis' claim.

"Y-you! You're going to regret looking down on Lester! Next time, for sure...!"

"Shut it, Landy!"

Lester roared at his flunky and exited the pavilion, his rage barely restrained.

"Don't you dare underestimate me! I will make you acknowledge my strength!"

Shouting these words, he left the scene, the remaining two scrambling after him.

"Ugh...I can't stand him."

Waiting until they had passed out of sight, Julis sat down once more.

"Ahaha...it looks like I've stuck my head somewhere unwanted again."

"Seriously. Thanks to your meddling, I wasted more time than usual."

"Sorry about that. Is it usually like this?"

Julis threw her hands up in response.

"Lester can't stand me. Even though there are others like him, he's still the first to harass me to this degree."

"But still, he's ranked ninth. He must be quite strong, right?"

Ayato thought he'd follow up by asking if things were fine.

Even though he'd only known Julis for half a day, he knew she wasn't the kind of person to speak ill of others.

"If you're going to ask if he's strong or not, well then, of course he's strong. That said, the ranking doesn't just refer to how capable you are. To find a place in among the Named Cards requires more than just strength; suitability matters more than anything else."

Julis lifted her face, the corner of her lips turning in a smile.

Seeing Julis' eyes light up, Ayato hurriedly turned his gaze.

"Seeing as this is the perfect opportunity, I want to ask you something."

"Hmm... Wha, what would that be?"

"The duel this morning, were you using Meteoric Battle Techniques (Meteor Arts)? How'd you use that Lux without tuning it first?"

"Oh. No, that wasn't."

"...What do you mean?"

"Well, to begin with, I can't use Meteor Arts. Truth is, I've never really found a Lux I'm compatible with before, a cause of no small frustration for me. If given the chance, I'm much more accustomed to using a normal weapon."

"Then that technique from this morning...?"

"That was purely kenjutsu^[3]. My family runs a dojo which practices sword techniques passed on from long ago, so I can somehow manage."

"That was just kenjutsu...?"

Julis' eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"...If it's a Lux blade, severing my flames isn't something unimaginable. With that said, this is the first time I've ever seen anyone do such a job of it. Just what levels of swordsmanship have you attained...?"

"Haha, nothing out of the ordinary."

"...Forget it. You just keep wearing that stupid expression and playing the role of a spectator. This isn't the kind of place you think it is, where you can just naively stride your way through things."

"I'm nowhere that naive."

Ayato shook his head lightly.

"Anyway, Julis, why are you taking part in these kinds of dangerous battles?"

"What?"

"I'm curious. You're a princess, right?"

"I most certainly am Lieseltania's First Princess, but that's not why. Those who come to this school are all fighting for the same reason - to grasp those things which cannot be obtained otherwise. This holds true regardless of title or position or anything like that."

Although she answered in a calm voice, her iron will and steely resolve could be clearly felt.

"...And what is it that you seek?"

Ayato was unsure if he should continue this line of questioning, but in the end, he continued.

Surprisingly, Julis answered.

"Money."

"...?"

"I need money, and fighting here is the quickest way to get it."

...a princess was fighting for money?

No matter how you looked at it, a princess ought to be rather wealthy indeed.

Just what did she mean?

"There's not much time left. I must seize the victor's crown at each event of this season's Festa. That's my goal."

"Winning all three events..."

In other words, a "grand slam."

Ayato fully understood just how impossible a task that was.

"That's right. First up is the Phoenix. At the very least, I need the money from that."

The prize money from the Festa was split among the winners. Supposedly winning just once was enough to live comfortably for the rest of one's life.

"..."

As Ayato was still searching for his own goal, her answer was hard to digest.

The differences between what they sought were readily apparent.

His remaining question, however, was much more easily answered.

"Speaking of which, I seem to remember you're still looking for a partner?"

Remembering Claudia's words to Julis from earlier, he inquired.

The Phoenix was a partner-based tag-team format, and thus Julis was incapable of entering by herself.

"Mm, that's right. There certainly is such a requirement."

Julis mumbled out a reply. Finding a partner was anything but trivial for her; given her personality, this was, after all, only to be expected.

"E-even if I haven't found a partner yet, don't take that to mean I don't have any friends, ok?! Or rather, even though I really don't have any friends, this and that are two different things. The problem is that I can't find anyone who meets my standards for a partner."

-She'd just admitted she had no friends.

"So what kind of person are you looking for?"

"That, hmm...Well, for starters, they can't be weaker than me; at the level of one of the Top Twelve. They must have impeccable character, a keen mind, staunch will, and the noble spirit of a knight."

"...Isn't that a bit much?"

"Re-really? I'd considered lowering my standards a bit..."

This part of her was true to her image as a princess.

"The registration deadline is rapidly approaching. This really isn't the time to be so demanding."

Julis muttered to herself, picking up her bag and rising.

"Well, it's about time for me to head on back. Actually, first, I want to ask something. What brought you here?"

"Oh, well, originally I thought this way was a shortcut, but the gate was locked."

"Yeah, once evening comes, some of the gates will lock automatically, though this seems to be restricted to those connected to the junior high building."

That made sense.

"Hmm, even if you say they close automatically, is there really no chance that they'd take a day off and just stay open?"

"Huh?"

"Well, it's just that I like to go out for walks, and so this is kinda troublesome."

At Ayato's words, Julis looked like she'd just caught a glimpse of a total fool.

"...A-ahahaha!"

Unable to restrain herself, she broke out into laughter.

"Of course not! Are you an idiot or something? After what happened this morning, did you really not think to consult a map? Don't worry, even if it's night, the high school gates don't close."

She looked as if she'd just told the greatest joke.

This expression suited her age, and for a moment, she looked nothing so much like a normal girl.

"Hmm? What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I just never thought you'd smile like that."

"What!?"

Julis reddened.

"W-what are you saying all of a sudden?! Are you making fun of me?"

Returning to her default angry state, she turned aside in a huff.

"You should try and lighten up a little, otherwise it's such a waste."

"So annoying; keep your words to yourself."

Julis gritted her teeth.

"A-and that leisurely look on your face; you should change it! A loose face and loose actions! That's the cause of this morning's stupidity!"

...That was getting a little carried away.

"Certainly, half of that was definitely my fault. The other half was caused by lack of knowledge."

This school was simply way too big. Add to that a mountain of unknown customs and practices, and it was all too much for a transfer student to take in.

Perhaps he should have someone guide him-

"Ah."

Ayato turned to stare at Julis.

"W, what is it...?"

Julis unconsciously reddened slightly and retreated a step.

"-Julis, would you mind showing me around campus? Oh, and around town as well?"

"...What?"

In response to Ayato's request, Julis' thinly veiled disgust showed on her face.

"What're you talking about? Why should I do anything like that?"

"Because, didn't you say that you owed me one? You never said anything about what I could call it in for. At least hear me out."

"Well, I certainly did say that...Don't tell me you're being serious?"

"Serious?"

"If that's what you really want, then sure. My original intention was that when you found yourself in a moment of crisis, I'd come to your aid. The favor I owe you isn't something trivial. Anything up to a certain degree - excepting, of course, anything shameless - is fine; for example, borrowing my strength, the strength of a Page One."

"By that you mean you'd lend me your strength in battle?"

"Exactly."

"Not interested."

Ayato rejected her offer flat-out with a shake of his head.

"As before, I think getting more familiar with this campus is best."

"..."

At his immediate reply, having spared not a moment's thought before answering, Julis turned a questioning glance at Ayato before laughing.

"What an immeasurable man. Or maybe just an idiot...?"

"...If those are my choices, I'll go with the first, thank you."

"You don't say. Whatever, forget it. If you want me to guide you, then allow me."

"I appreciate the help."

"I, it can't be helped. A favor's a favor. The campus tour we can do tomorrow, after school. As for the tour of the city, hmm...leave your day off free."

"My thanks."

And the last of his worries was solved.

"Alright, then I'll head back now...U-uwah!"

Turning to exit the pavilion, Ayato's lapel was grabbed from behind.

"Here's the first lesson. If you want to head back to the male dorms from here, the fastest way is through the university building."

"*cough* *cough* Thanks. Also, if your 'lessons' were a little gentler next time, it'd be greatly appreciated."

Looking at Ayato, choking, Julis smiled lightly.

"That wasn't listed as a requirement just now, so...I refuse."

By the time Ayato arrived back at the dorms, the sky had already turned dark.

The male dormitories faced directly opposite the female dorms, with the high school building in between. When compared to the female dormitory building, with its classical architecture, the male building was decidedly more plain.

"Hmm, room 221, looks like."

This time carefully double-checking a map, Ayato entered the room.

Although each of the buildings was separated, the use of a communal staircase gave opportunities to catch glimpse of both junior high and university students, a rather novel experience. There were a few students who studied Ayato like a rare animal. This left him feeling out of place, a feeling he ended by shaking their hands.

Room 221 was located on the second floor. Next to the door, a shiny new nameplate read "Amagiri Ayato".

"Welcome back. It's pretty late, though."

"Some things happened."

Knocking on the door before he entered, Ayato saw Eishirou lying on his bed, waving his hand in welcome.

"Wow, it's bigger than I imagined."

It was a ten-tatami room, already furnished with a bed and a desk.

Aside from a chair, not a thing lay in sight, excepting the luggage he'd sent earlier.

"Is that all your stuff? There's way too little!"

"Just clothes. You don't have all that much either, Yabuki."

All that adorned Eishirou's desk was a pile of sticky notes and a mountain of books; all in all, rather plain.

"I don't bother with things that don't interest me. Everything there is related to club activities."

"That reminds me, the newspaper club ought to know. The student named Lester, what kind of person is he?"

"Lester? Lester McPhail?"

"That sounds right. I hear he's ranked ninth?"

"You've heard correctly. Furious Axe of Distant Thunder(Kornephoros) Lester."

Eishirou sat up, fiddled with his phone for a bit, and brought up a display screen in midair.

An image of the person he had just seen appeared before his eyes.

"Lester McPhail. First year student at Seidokan Academy, ranked ninth among the Top Twelve. His style leverages his physical strength, proving unmatched in close-quarters combat. However, he has no strategies for dealing with the Strega or Dante. His weapon is an axe-shaped Lux named 'Bardiche Leo'."

"Oh, impressive."

"Well, that's all stuff you can find online. If you want more detailed information, then that's an altogether different matter."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you need this."

Eishirou rubbed his fingers together.

"Money!?"

"Of course. Students at this school - actually, this applies to all the schools; students of Asterisk City can basically be divided into one of two groups. Those in the first are like the Princess, who place the Festa as their goal. The other consists of those like myself, who gave up on the Festa early on."

"...You've already given up?"

"That's right. Even if we're all from the same Starpulse Generation, it's ludicrous to even think of winning. Once you find yourself here, whether you want to or not, the difference between your abilities and others' is very quickly made apparent. Of this gaping chasm of ability, I am well-aware. Although, truth be told, to those who refuse to simply give in, that's not quite how we look at things."

"What do you mean by that?"

To Ayato's searching eyes, Eishirou seemed quite delighted.

"That's simple. When it comes to those of us who have nothing to do with the Festa, watching by the sidelines and cheerfully earning money as others fight it out is something only our Newspaper Club can do."

"But how does the Newspaper Club earn any money?"

Student club activities weren't exactly something you normally associated with making money.

"How rude! We happen to have plenty of work, you know? You've probably seen videos of Asterisk on the TV or on the web before, right? Those are the fruits of our labors. We have an agreement with outside news organizations who are unable to enter the premises."

That does seem to make sense.

"Haha, so that's how it is. In other words, you guys sell this footage and other information to outside news organizations."

"Exactly."

Eishirou gave a thumbs-up.

"This aside, there are many other paths. Taking the clubs, for example, there's the meteoric engineering research society, whose skills likely

exceed that of the equipment division. That said, when compared to the best in the city at it, Allekant Academy, we're nowhere near that level. There're also methods slightly less on the up and up which use match results as a grounds for betting. Numerous students make their money that way."

"...That's not banned by the school?"

Their actions had completely surpassed the bounds of what Ayato felt was approvable school behavior.

Eishirou lightly shook his head.

"In today's world, as long as you have money, no one will say a word. "

The Integrated Enterprise Foundation's efforts to enliven the economy were centered around stimulating trade.

Achieving this goal required the smooth circulation of money. To this end, they would reward efforts which resulted in increased consumer spending.

It was for this very reason that Asterisk had been established.

"Put simply, particularly outstanding students usually have their own following. For the Top Twelve, this is doubly true."

"Hmm? Does that mean that Lester does as well?"

Ayato thought of the two students who had followed in his wake.

"Mm, do you mean this?"

Eishirou manipulated his phone, opening two more windows.

One person was rather thin and the other rather plump. Although their outer appearances were polar opposites, the servile, fawning expression on their faces was identical.

"Yeah, them!"

"The skinny one is Cyrus Norman. He's a Dante, and though we have no records of his battles, his ability should be object manipulation. The slightly larger one is Landy Hooke. He was formerly listed among the Named Cards, although he has since dropped out of the standings. He uses a bow-type Lux."

"Just one after another..."

Ayato didn't know what to say.

Eishirou's information seemed to cover all sorts of prominent students, including even these two.

"Hehehe, scared, are we?"

Eishirou closed the windows and leaped onto his bed.

"Now then, it's just about time for dinner. Why don't I show you the cafeteria?"

"Before that, there's something else I'd like ask about Lester."

"Hmm?"

"What's his relationship with Julis?"

At Ayato's question, Eishirou broke into a wide grin.

"I see, I see. Here I was, wondering why you'd suddenly ask about Lester all of a sudden; now it makes sense. You're really aiming for that Princess?"

"I-it's not like that."

Despite his words, it was the undeniable truth that Ayato was greatly concerned with Julis, though he wasn't quite clear why.

"Good question, but...Didn't I just finish explaining how this world works?"

Waiting for Ayato's nod of agreement, Eishirou opened another window.

This time it was a video. The screen showed a young girl, in command of flames, dancing around a battlefield.

Her opponent was a large male student, brandishing an axe almost as large as he was. A moment's glance was sufficient to determine which party was in complete control of the situation.

"This was taken during last year's official ranking matches. At the time, Lester was ranked fifth, the Princess, 17th."

"You mean..."

"Yes, it was the Princess' complete victory. This was her inaugural match as one of the Top Twelve."

"I'm guessing Lester didn't see it that way."

"Yeah, in the two following ranking matches, Lester challenged her twice, losing both times."

The official ranking matches were a tournament held monthly to determine the school's best.

Although students were granted the freedom to accept or reject duels as they might, the ability to reject each and every request was counterproductive. In order to prevent students from monopolizing the rankings by simply rejecting all duels, the official ranking match system was put in place. Under this system, when a Page One received a duel request from a lower ranked student, they had to accept the match.

"Challenging any particular opponent to a ranking match can only be done at most twice, forestalling the opportunity for foul play."

"-In other words, Lester can no longer challenge Julis in an official ranking match?"

That would explain why he was constantly pestering her for a duel.

"Lester's not just proud, but very passionate as well. He wants to get even, no matter what. That said...I don't think it's possible."

Having thus spoken, Eishirou returned his phone to his pocket.

"What're you thinking?"

"Even given what we've just seen, I don't think winning's impossible."

His compatibility against Julis was certainly poor, but that only made his strength all the more evident. Luck played a factor as well.

"It's just that...they're looking at different things."

"Mm."

Julis' eyes held no trace of Lester's presence.

No, she was gazing afar, at something far out of reach.

If that truly was the reality of things, then indeed Lester had not the slightest hope of catching up to her.

-Ayato remembered the same look in her eyes as she'd fought him.

"Thanks, Yabuki. How much do I owe you?"

Even if Ayato was a special invitee student, with tuition, room, and board all waived, it wasn't like he was flush with cash either. The family dojo, after all, teetered on the edge of ruin.

He wasn't at the point of needing to work for pocket money, but it was still best to be a little frugal.

"Right then, let's get some grub! Let's go, Amagiri!"

Eishirou's response was to hook his arm around Ayato's neck, and drag him out the door.

"Uwah! W-wait!"

"Our cafeteria has both Japanese and Western cuisines. Which do you prefer?"

"Um, Japanese then..."

"Japanese is it? Today's dishes are yuan-yaki^[4], agedashi tofu^[5], and daikon and chikuwa^[6] stew. Please treat me to the agedashi tofu."

"...Huh?"

"In celebration of your arrival, I'm waiving the fee this time."

Eishirou laughed, patting Ayato on the back with his arm.

"What do you think, I'm pretty easy to get along with, aren't I?"

"I'd normally agree...if you weren't the one saying it."

Ayato smiled, returning the friendly pat on the back.

Chapter 4 - Reminiscence and Reunion

It was an early summer night replete with the fragrance of greenery.

That day, a young boy was seated in the corner of a dojo.

Basking in the darkness, he wore an expression that spoke of deep displeasure. How long he had spent there, he neither knew nor cared. Budging not an inch, he was lost in thoughts both melancholy and resentful.

"Really now! What happened this time? You wouldn't believe how angry Father is!"

The door suddenly swung open, and the moonlight poured through the open frame, accompanied by a soft and gentle voice.

"...I didn't do anything wrong."

The boy responded sulkily, turning away from the light.

The girl, her silhouette drawn against the light of the moon, sighed.

Sweeping her hair back with her hands, an exasperated expression on her face, she continued to look at the boy. From their appearances, the girl looked to be five, maybe six years older. She wore a short-sleeved sailor uniform, and the lively aura she gave off well suited her.

"Ayato."

"But Onee-chan! It was all because that bastard..."

"Ayato!"

Hearing her voice grow sharp, the boy reflexively pulled back.

"Uuu.."

The boy swallowed his words as his face tightened and his eyes began to brim with tears.

"...But, if you've honestly reflected on things, then I'll hear you out."

"Will you really?"

In a flash, the boy's face brightened.

"You've genuinely reflected?"

"Yeah, I have!"

"Really?"

"Really!"

"Really truly?"

"Really truly!"

"Really truly honestly?"

"...Onee-chan, didn't you say before that people will hate a girl who repeats things too many times?"

~whap!~

"...I'm sorry, I'm reflecting now."

"Good."

The girl nodded solemnly.

"First things first. Please sit in seiza."

"But I'm already in seiza, Onee-chan."

"...S-sit more properly."

"I've been in seiza this entire time, though, Onee-chan."

The girl coughed slightly and reddened before withdrawing a pair of glasses from the pocket of her uniform.

"I think Onee-chan doesn't like to wear glasses because she worries she looks weird with them on."

"S-shut it! That has nothing to do with anything!"

Though those black, horn-rimmed glasses indubitably suited her, the girl still couldn't bring herself to like them.

"So...What happened?"

As the topic of conversation turned serious, the boy's attitude did likewise.

"Nothing! It was those guys who were bothering me..."

Ayato explained that the other dojo students had constantly mocked him.

Their father had sternly warned Ayato not to engage any of the students. Not that that had done much to forestall their contempt for him.

Though the students were few in number, they were all members of the Starpulse Generation. It was government policy for those of their generation to be trained in the martial arts, in order to cultivate maturity and discipline.

From where the boy stood though, that couldn't be further from the truth.

All they wanted was to prove their strength - that they were stronger than him.

The law severely punished members of the Starpulse Generation, juvenile or otherwise, who engaged in acts of violence against those who were not. For this reason, they'd chosen Ayato, who was a member of the same, as their target.

"But those bastards! About Onee-chan, they...!"

The boy bit his lips to stifle his fury.

The girl was also a student of their dojo. Having been given strict orders not to get entangled in disputes with the others, Ayato did his best to avoid them altogether, and so their encounters were few. The current students were new, and so they had not as of yet met the girl.

Of the fact that the girl's strength surpassed all others, the boy harbored not a shadow of doubt.

"And so, that's why I fought them!"

As to the final result of the conflict, the girl did not inquire.

"...Hmm."

The girl thought for a moment, before speaking carefully.

"I see. Ayato, you really weren't wrong."

"See!"

The boy eagerly looked up.

The girl, however, hadn't yet finished speaking.

"-Unfortunately, you weren't right either."

"Huh?"

"Ayato, do you know why Father forbade contact with the others?"

"..."

The boy's only response was to lower his head with a grumble.

He'd asked their father on times previous, but had never received an answer.

"It's because you are strong. But, Ayato, your strength isn't meant for hurting others. If you hurt them, Ayato...the one you're really hurting is yourself."

"But I'm not hurt? I feel fine."

"That's because you aren't yet relying on power."

The girl's voice had taken on a bit of an austere tone.

"Until you truly push your strength to its limits, you won't feel the pain. Instead, in recompense, someone else must suffer. Neither Father nor I want to see Ayato become that kind of person."

"...?"

"To fight to protect one's dignity is a right that everyone has, and thus Ayato, you've done no wrong. However, Ayato, you're still not capable of bearing the burden of loss and victory that come from a duel. Since you thus bear no responsibility, your fight and a true duel are as different as night and day."

"...I don't really get it."

The boy understood that his sister was trying to convey a message of great import, but he still couldn't quite understand the meaning thereof.

"Simply put, it's too early for you to be fighting anyone, Ayato."

"Then when can I?"

"Hmm...let's put it this way."

The girl propped a finger against her chin.

"If I had to say, then it's when you know what it is you want to accomplish."

"What it is I want to accomplish...?"

"That's right. If that's the case, then you'll be able to decide how and when to use your strength."

"Ok."

Satisfied, the girl nodded and gently rapped the boy's forehead with her fingers.

Suddenly, a thought came to the boy's mind, and he spoke.

"Onee-chan?"

"Hmm?"

"Onee-chan, have you already found 'what it is you want to accomplish'?"

The girl's face wrinkled in displeasure for a brief moment before turning gentle once more.

"Of course. The thing I want to do is-"

Stopping for a moment to take the boy into her arms, she continued.

"To protect you, Ayato."

"Me...?"

"That's right. To me, you are more important than anything else in this world."

"Then, then I'll protect Onee-chan too! That's 'what it is I want to accomplish'!"

The boy was completely serious. As he was to her, she was to him; a person more precious than any other, someone irreplaceable.

The girl smiled mischievously, extending a finger to poke the boy in the forehead.

"Ahaha, somebody sure is pretentious. Am I to take that to mean you think you're stronger than me?"

"Uu..."

The girl's strength was, without a doubt, leagues above the boy's own.

On this point, the boy was clearer than any other, and so he held his silence.

"But more importantly, you need to find that which is more important to you still. Ayato, you're a boy, so that day will surely come."

"...I still don't really get it."

At the boy's somber tone, the girl hugged him tighter still.

"For now, this is plenty."

"...Onee-chan?"

"Thank you, Ayato. Thank you for getting mad on my behalf. I love you so much..."

Ayato brushed the towel aside, and snapped upright like a coiled spring.

Checking the time, it looked to be around four in the morning.

From the window, the dusky light of the sun just before dawn came through.

"...That memory again..."

Before the morning alarm sounded, he turned the clock off, and stretched his stiff body.

He'd had quite the busy day previous, but though thoroughly exhausted, he'd woken at the usual time.

"Actually, today was quite fortunate."

If that dream had continued...

Ayato shook his head and proceeded to change his clothes.

What he put on, however, was not his uniform, but rather a T-shirt and pair of shorts, better suited for training.

The habit of early morning training was also one that his sister had impressed upon him; he wasn't likely to be so proactive otherwise. His sister, at times stern, at times warm and kind, had raised him in place of their departed mother.

"...Oh, that's what it is."

A lightbulb suddenly went off in Ayato's brain.

The look in Julis' eyes was identical to his sister. Her eyes had spoken of her desire to "protect Ayato".

Those were the eyes of one who possessed an unswerving resolve and firm conviction.

Eyes that Ayato had, as of yet, never had.

"-Alright."

Ayato took hold of the Lux he'd left near his pillow, hanging it on his back.

Though he was admittedly more comfortable with the shinai his family had used, given where he was now, foregoing a Lux wasn't an option.

Figuring his classmate was still asleep, he'd planned on taking off without a word, when, to his surprise, a cheerful voice rang out.

"Just what you'd expect from a special invitee student; this early and already off to train."

Face still showing all the signs of sleep, Eishirou had only one eye open as he spoke, though he showed a toothy smile.

"Sorry if I woke you."

"No worries. I'm a bit of a light sleeper. That said, I'm just dreaming right now anyway."

Eishirou hugged his pillow as he whispered.

"cuz, you know, I could have sworn I'd heard someone talking in their sleep just now."

"!"

Ayato blushed.

"U, um, Yabuki? You definitely were just imagining things. But just as, you know, a reference...would you mind repeating what you think you heard?"

"Mm! I love Onee-chan too!"

"M-hm-mm-mrm"

Ayato rushed over to Eishirou's bedside in a flash, and jammed his hand over his mouth.

"That was a dream! You were just dreaming, do you hear me!?"

"You know, I think you might just be right. Hmm, what should I do...? Oh, by the way, Amagiri, what're your plans for breakfast - Japanese or Western?"

At Eishirou's words, Ayato's shoulders sagged in defeat.

"I get it already. Eat whatever you want, my treat."

"Sounds good, yuan-yaki it is!"

It looks like anytime something like this happens, the way to his heart is through his stomach, Ayato thought.

It seemed the moment of crisis had passed; for the moment, anyway.

"Right then, I'm heading back to sleep. Have fun working hard at your training."

"Ha..."

In his estimation, the number of times he'd sighed since entering the school had increased exponentially.

"A~ah. So tired...Morning, everyone."

Stretching lazily, Eishirou pulled open the door to their classroom.

He proceeded to summarily pass out on his desk; it seemed he really hadn't had enough sleep.

Ayato could only stare in amazement at Eishirou, his face flat against his desk. The classroom was filled with the air of lively chatter, a scene you'd find in any school.

Attendance was surprisingly good; it seemed the students at this school were of a rather sober nature.

"Morning, Julis."

"...Morning."

Ayato greeted his neighbor, who, cheek resting on her hand, greeted him in turn.

In an instant, the previously noisy classroom was filled with silence.

"Hey, did you just hear that...?"

"...T, the Princess greeted someone...?"

"Are we hearing things...?"

"Just what kind of black magic did that guy use...?"

"Rather, that can't be the real Princess, can it?"

Seeing the uproar which had taken ahold of their class, Julis slammed her hands on her desk and rose.

"Y-you all sure are rude! I was just returning his greeting!"

In spite of Julis' sullen expression, the clamor didn't lessen one bit.

This was way beyond expectation.

Their classmates' reaction made plain just what kind of classmate Julis typically was.

(Maybe this is a rare opportunity to try and get along with everyone?)

Thinking on Julis' behalf, Ayato reminded himself that this was only his second day.

It was all well and good to worry over Julis, but honestly, he needed to worry about himself first.

At that moment, Ayato realized that the seat on his left, which had been empty the day before, was now filled.

There a young girl with beautiful blue hair lay on her desk, fast asleep.

It seemed unlikely that she was like himself, who'd transferred over just recently. She'd probably just taken the day off.

Though he thought that he'd best greet her as well, she gave no hint of waking anytime soon.

As he considered his options, the girl suddenly lifted her head.

Nice, here came opportunity, knocking at the door.

"Good morning to you, neighbor. I transferred here just yesterday; I'm Amagiri-"

Ayato's introduction came to a screeching halt.

"...?"

Catching a glimpse of the girl's face, he froze.

"S-Saya...?"

"..."

The girl looked on expressionlessly, before at last tilting her head slightly.

"...Ayato?"

There was no doubt about it. She was Sasamiya Saya.

Ayato stood up in a fluster. From behind, two eyes fairly gleamed with the delight of a small child given a new toy.

Eishirou.



"What's this, what's this? You two know each other?"

"Ah, yeah. We used to be friends, or rather, we're childhood friends."

"Childhood friends...?" Eishirou asked, eyeing them suspiciously.

"Then why didn't you know she was a student here?"

"Well, even if I say we're childhood friends, ever since Saya moved abroad six years ago, we haven't kept in touch."

"Ho~, so that's why there's been no response from that side."

To be sure, even after recognizing Ayato, Saya's expression has barely changed.

"Hmm, how do I put this, the feeling's pretty much the same, so I was rather surprised really."

"Really?"

"...Yeah, really."

"...I sure didn't see anything that looked like surprise."

Saya's "reaction" hadn't even extended to the raising of her eyebrows, prompting Eishirou's question.

"But still, it sure has been a long time. Everything good?" Saya suddenly asked.

"You know, you sure haven't changed one bit, Saya."

Saya vigorously shook her head from left to right.

"...No way. I've grown a bit taller."

"I-I see..."

Still surprised at their sudden reunion, Ayato sized up his childhood friend.

Her eyes were rather large, to the point that the rest of her face didn't leave much of an impression. Her height didn't appear to differ in the least from when they'd parted, and would have been more appropriate for a student in elementary, rather than high school. Her expression didn't seem to change much either. She looked, for lack of a better word, like a rather cute doll.

"You really do look the same..."

"Wrong. It's that you've grown too much."

Saya puffed up her cheeks sulkily.

"...Don't worry about it, though. I've already decided that I'm going to grow as tall as you by next year, so if you just grow a little, we'll make quite the pair," Saya mumbled to herself.

Unfortunately, whatever her thoughts on the matter, closing a gap of 30 centimeters in a year seemed unlikely, if not impossible.

"It sure is a small world, or maybe we should call this a fated reunion?"

"Fated reunion...Mm. You've said something good, Yabuki."

Saya gave him a thumbs-up.

This way of praising others was, similarly, unchanged from before.

"Speaking of which, how's your dad doing?"

Saya's father was a meteoric engineering researcher, specializing in the development of Lux weapons. The reason the Sasamiya family had left the country six years prior was because of his career.

"...In good health, although I wish he'd be a bit more dignified about things."

"Haha, it sounds like he's the same as always then."

Ayato's impression of Saya's father could be summed up in two words: mad scientist.

He remembered even now the uproarious laughter which had filled the Sasamiya household during his past visits.

From what he'd heard, her father was well-regarded in his field, although due to his difficult personality, he'd had to change jobs with fair frequency.

"I came here because Dad wanted me to."

"He did?"

Saya reached out and unholstered her Lux from her uniform.

Activating it, a large gun appeared. From the smoothness of her actions, Ayato could tell how much time she'd spent with it.

"In order to spread the word of Dad's creations."

"Spreading the word, I see..."

Although hardly to the point of being a danger to one's life, Asterisk could hardly be called a safe place. To send his daughter here solely for the sake of spreading the word of his inventions; Ayato found he couldn't approve of his actions.

"It doesn't seem like that decision was just made on a whim. This place is quite well-known, and the potential results you'd see from making things known here are without limit. That is, after all, at least part of the reason the Integrated Enterprise Foundation created this city in the first place," Eishirou cut in to say.

"Are you fine with that, Saya?"

"I have my own reasons for accepting, don't worry," Saya responded, to alleviate Ayato's concerns.

"Hmm, and what reason would that be?"

Eishirou had shifted into reporter mode, with a notepad in one hand and a serious expression on his face.

"That's a secret," Saya said, glancing at Ayato.

"Although half of that reason is already..."

"Hoho~"

Eishirou seemed to have been clued in on something by those words.

"That reminds me, when you first joined the school Sasamiya, you made a request to leave Asterisk. How'd that go?"

Though Asterisk was physically located on Japanese soil, it was legally sovereign land. As such, one who wished to leave the city first had to make a proper request through their school.

"...I haven't gotten permission yet. What about it?"

"Nothing~ It's just that, if I'm not wrong, that request to leave no longer needs to be granted~"

Eishirou's devilish grin was stopped short, as he suddenly closed his mouth in a hurry.

The reason? It was likely a reaction to the barrel of Saya's gun, now leveled at his throat.

"...Let's not say anything unnecessary, alright?"

"Alright~ I understand. I'm sorry. My bad."

With the gun aimed straight at him, Eishirou could only raise his arms in surrender.

"I really have no idea what's going on, but I should point out that, despite her appearance, Saya has something of a temper. It'd be best not to anger her."

"You should have said that sooner."

"Hurry back to your seats, homeroom's starting."

Kyouko greeted the class as she walked in with a sleepy look on her face.

She dragged her bat with the suspicious history across the floor, evoking an ear-piecing screech which filled the students with an unnamed fear.

"You over there, the classroom's no place to be waving around your weapon- Wait, aren't you Sasamiya?"

"...Good morning."

"Why didn't you come to class yesterday? You better have a good reason."

Kyouko stomped over to stand rudely in Saya's face, folding her arms as she awaited a response.

"...I overslept."

"Hahaha! So you overslept, is that all?"

~thump!~

"...it hurts..."

"You idiot! How many times is this now? You're going to make up those classes on your next break."

Having been struck on the head, Saya's expression was, for the most part unchanged. From the corners of her eyes, however, tears began to form.

"Ha...It seems you're still bad with mornings."

"...My blanket's too cozy; I can't help it."

"..."

As Ayato and Saya chatted, Julis, in the seat next over, idly observed their antics.

After class, that same day.

"...Hmm, something like this, I guess?"

Julis mumbled to herself as she double-checked her appearance in the restroom mirror.

The reflection staring back at her was beautiful, with hair that she wasn't all that fond of, and an immaculate uniform.

Maybe she was being oversensitive, but the state of her dress was a matter of proper etiquette. If her attire wasn't all in order, then she couldn't calm down. If that person hadn't made such comments before, then she wouldn't be paying such careful attention to this. Yeah, that was the case.

Telling herself this, Julis exited the bathroom and returned to the classroom.

Though there weren't any other students left, Ayato remained in his normal seat, conversing and laughing with Saya.

Since this was their joyful reunion after having been parted for some number of years, this kind of joyful conversation was to be expected.

Despite understanding this in her mind, for some reason, Julis' heart just wouldn't calm down.

"So, um, are you ready to go?"

"Oh, Julis. I sure am. Please lead the way."

"I-it can't be helped. A promise is a promise."

Julis deliberately turned away, although she continued to watch Ayato out of the corner of her eye.

Outwardly, she wore an unhurried expression which radiated calm.

But inside, as she remembered the earnest look in his eyes as he'd saved her, her heart was a raging storm.

Her heart seemed to tie itself into knots as she struggled to understand what she felt. She shook her head to clear her thoughts.

"...Promise?"

Overhearing their words, Saya asked in surprise.

"I'd asked Julis to show me around campus."

"Riessfeld? Why?"

"Well, it's complicated. Either way, it has nothing to do with you, Sasamiya."

"...grr-"

Saya frowned unhappily.

"Let's go."

"Alright. See you tomorrow Saya."

"...Wait just a moment. If that's all he needs, then I'll be the one to show him around."

"What!?"

"Huh?"

This abrupt declaration left both Ayato and Julis speechless.

"I'm sorry, but we'll have to decline that offer. I refuse to back out on a promise."

"...Given how little you seem to want to show Ayato around, it seems best that I do so instead."

"W-who said anything about not wanting to show him around?! For starters, Sasamiya, you've only been a student here for a year. In comparison, I've been here since junior high. Which one of us is more appropriate should be obvious."

Sparks seemed to fly between the two of them.

"Um, listen here you two..."

Although Ayato tried to calm things down, neither party paid him the slightest bit of attention.

"Oh, well if that's how we're judging things, then I'm clearly the most suited for the job."

"Wha...!?"

Having appeared at some unknown point in time, Claudia spoke, as she stuck her head out from behind Ayato.

She held Ayato in her arms, her breasts pressed directly against his back.

At the sight of this scene, Julis and Saya's expressions grew more horrifying yet.

"Julis only transferred here in her third year of junior high. I started here."

"...Who're you?"

"What're you doing here?"

"Actually, strike that. Get out of here, Claudia!"

"Oh my. How terribly cold. It's such a rare opportunity, why don't I join in?"

"...No thanks."

"I decline."

"Alas, how unfortunate. Well then, there's the matter of the task for which I came. Everyone else, please stand back."

Claudia looked quite disappointed as she left her position on Ayato's back, instead handing him a file.

"Your appointment for Ogre Lux selection and compatibility testing has been determined. It will take place tomorrow. Please read over this document, and if you agree, sign here."

"Oh, that."

Although the appointment's date of the following day was rather sudden, it was a good opportunity to verify for himself whether or not the Ogre Lux in question had really been used by his sister. An opportunity he couldn't afford to pass up.

"I understand. That said, there's quite a lot here."

The document was over ten pages in length, with each page densely packed with words.

"What you're dealing with is Integrated Enterprise Foundation property, after all. Even if it's all just a formality, the preceding requirements process is looooong."

"The student council president herself is hand-delivering paperwork; it almost makes one think how leisurely the student council must be."

"Yep. This way we can ensure that all of our students are growing up to be good boys and girls."

Claudia cleverly dealt with Julis' sarcasm.

"...Claudia and Julis are good friends?"

"Just so."

"100% wrong."

At the simultaneous, yet completely contrasting answers, Ayato tilted his head in confusion.

"My, how terribly distant."

"We met a few times at the Wiener Opernball^[7]. That's it. End of story."

The Wiener Opernball is Europe's largest opera ball.

For the young ladies of the upper crust, it presents a singular opportunity for social contact.

"Now that your task is complete, please leave."

"...Shoo, shoo."

"I wish everyone a delightful day. Since I will monopolize Ayato for all of tomorrow, allow me to first apologize to everyone."

Claudia curtsied, and left. Julis and Saya stared daggers at her back until it disappeared into the distance.

"I can't stand that fox! Just because her breasts are a little bit big, she thinks she can do whatever she wants...It's just useless fat anyway!"

"...I agree."

Saya nodded her agreement of Julis' words.

The former atmosphere of mutual hostility seemed like an illusion, giving way instead to mutual agreement.

"It's a pretty rare occasion, why don't the two of you show me around together?"

Hoping to preserve the good atmosphere, Ayato proposed a compromise.

"The two of us...?"

"..."

Julis and Saya stared at one another for a moment, before giving a grudging, wry smile.

"...I understand."

"Fine. Continuing to argue would just be a waste of time."

"Hah..."

Ayato wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, his expression revealing his deep-seated relief.

And thus their party of three made their way around campus-

"This is the club building. While it's true that our school doesn't really have club activities, given the slightest hint of an interesting occurrence, you can be sure the Newspaper Club will be there, regardless of where it may be."

"...Nn, nn."

"This is the student union office. All matters concerning student welfare, appeals, etc. must pass through here."

"...I see."

"As for food services, I won't show you those right now. The school has seven cafeterias on the grounds, including a buffet. There's plenty of space underground, so it's being used in a variety of ways."

"...That's the first I've heard of it."

"Sasamiya, are you sure you don't need me to show you around as well?" Julis asked, as they stopped for a break in the central area.

"...What can I say? I'm bad with directions."

"And yet you volunteered to show others around?"

"Hehe."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"It's fine, isn't it? I've really learned a lot, thanks," Ayato said, languidly smiling as usual.

"I-if that's the case, then that's good."

"By the way, would you like something to drink? My treat."

"Red tea, if you would."

"...Apple juice, but not the kind that's made from concentrate."

"Got it."

Ayato walked around the large fountain, headed toward the high school building.

The vending machines in the junior high building were actually quite a bit closer to their current location, something Julis had just shared with him.

Julis considered that for a brief moment before laughing.

"...Riessfeld, let me ask you once more," Saya suddenly asked.

"What's up?"

"Why are you showing Ayato around?"

"You sure don't give up, do you? Forget it, I'll answer. I owe him a debt. That's why."

"A debt?"

Saya's question stopped Julis dead in her tracks, but she nonetheless answered openly.

"...Because in the middle of our duel, he helped me."

"A duel? Between Ayato and you?"

"That's right. You hadn't heard?"

Battles involving the Top Twelve were always a topic of discussion, and yesterday's duel was no exception.

It seemed this classmate of hers wasn't interested in the rankings.

"That's the most I'll say. Anything beyond that is private."

"...And the result?"

"Someone interfered during the middle of our fight. We never settled the matter."

"...That's weird."

"What is?"

"You fought with Ayato. There's no way you'd come out of it unharmed."

Julis found this utterly shocking statement unsurprisingly hard to swallow.

She considered for a moment that it might be a joke, but any chances of that were dispelled by the serious look in Saya's eyes.

"That's a rather rude estimation of my ability, don't you think?"

"...You are strong. I know that very well," Saya answered.

Saya's tone implied that such a thing was simple fact, which filled Julis with a strange, unsettling emotion.

"It's just that, at most, you're only around my level. That's nowhere near enough to be Ayato's opponent."

"-Ho. Someone's talking pretty big."

The atmosphere grew tense.

As far as Julis knew, Saya's name was not to be found in the Battle Omnicon. Moreover, Saya was clearly aware of her classmate's formidable reputation.

Although it wasn't like she intentionally kept her distance from others, but Saya hadn't participated in the ranking matches at all.

It went without saying that the ranking matches weren't the be-all, end-all of things; Julis herself had said as much to Ayato just earlier. There were those who hated to stand out, and purposely kept a low profile until the Festa itself.

That said, there was no way Julis was just going to let that comment stand.

"Why don't we test that confidence of yours?"

"..."

Saya rose, and silently created some distance between herself and Julis.

Taking Saya's actions as acceptance, Julis stood, and pulled out her school badge.

"I, Julis Alexia van Riessfeld challenge Sasamiya Saya to a duel."

Her words finished, Julis reflexively jumped aside.

At nearly the same moment, the bench gave out a groan as it was pierced by several arrows in succession.

"!"

The attack had come from the direction of the fountain square, and thus couldn't have come from Saya.

"The fountain!?"

Having entered the water at some unknown point, a black-garbed assassin appeared, their lower body still submerged beneath the water, a bow-type Lux in hand.

"Ugh, another ambush, is it?"

In all likelihood, the perpetrator was the same as from the previous incident.

Laughing mockingly, Julis gathered her Prana, and called forth her flames.

"Bloom proudly- White Firebloom of the Keen Lance(Longiflorum)!"

Appearing out of thin air, the flame lance was released immediately upon contact with the ground.

This perfectly-timed counterattack failed to either pierce or set aflame its intended target, and was instead blocked by a newly-appearing black shadow.

"There's one more than last time...and more than that, it's someone capable of actually holding off my flames."

The shadow who'd suddenly interfered in their battle was similarly clothed in black, and was using a large axe, requiring a two-handed grip, as a shield.

Although their manner of dress was utterly lacking in taste, it clearly denoted their role as partners. The still half-submerged attacker was slightly overweight, while his comrade was of rather large stature, nearly two meters in height.

She had no recollection of either that physique or that equipment, but this was hardly the time to be worried about something like that. Though neither of her opponents gave off much of a presence, they weren't likely opponents she could take lightly. Any questions she had could wait until she'd defeated them, and could beat the answers out of them.

Julis once again began to gather Prana, at which time-

"...~boom!~"

Accompanied by a deep rumble which shook the ground, the large assailant was thrown into the air.

He flew several dozen meters before finally impacting the ground with a vicious thump.

Initial shock aside, it seemed the impact had left him unable to move.

"...What?"

As the storm passed, Julis looked in the direction the attack had come from. There Saya stood holding a gun larger than her own body.

From the way things looked, Julis had a hard time deciding if Saya was holding that gigantic firearm up, or if it was holding her down"...What's that?"

"38th generation Lux grenade launcher - Helnekrom."

"When you say grenade launcher...you mean that thing shoots grenades?"

Saya nodded lightly, before absent-mindedly taking aim at the fountain.

"...Burst."

The firearm began to glow.

Prana massed in an instant, focused at the tip of the gun barrel. The light of its mana dite began to grow.

In other words-

"-Meteor Arts!"

The chunkier assassin jumped out of the water and made a break for it, but it was already too late.

三十九式煌型擲弾銃
ヘルネクラウム



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ん

"...~BOOM~"

Attended by an almost comical sound, the light burst forth, splitting the ground as it landed.

Their ears were assaulted by the booming roar of the explosion, which blew the fountain into dust.

Water poured out of the only part left standing, spilling over in all directions.

The scope of the explosion was on an entirely different level from Julis' own "Six-Petal Burst Firebloom". Its destructive capabilities were far closer to that of military armament.

"You're rather more extreme than you look."

"...Like you have room to talk."

Julis was struck dumb at her reply.

"I'm not going to thank you. I could have taken care of myself."

Though she faced a two-on-one confrontation, Julis had no doubt of her inevitable victory.

"Don't thank me. I only did that because they got in the way."

Saya continued in that monotone of hers, raising her head to catch Julis' eye.

"...Do you want to continue?"

Julis was confused for a moment until she realized Saya was referring to their duel. By now, however, that impulse had fled.

"No, that's not necessary. Your strength is real. I apologize for my disrespect earlier."

"...That's good."

Saya released her weapon.

This was just Julis' opinion, but the girl in front of her was undoubtedly a little odd.

"Alright, let's grab these two and hand them over to the disciplinary committee."

Almost as if they'd read her mind, the two assailants chose that moment to disappear into the forest.

There was no hint of the tall and large male from earlier.

"Well, they definitely seem healthy enough."

"...I'm amazed."

It seemed the two had managed to evade the powerful attack from just now. Normally speaking, one wouldn't be able to move an inch after something like that...

"Whatever. If we were to just blindly follow after them, it's likely we'd fall for a trap. On another note, Sasamiya, you just blasted school property into smithereens. Make sure you follow all procedures for cleanup, alright?"

"...Why me?"

"Because you were the one who blew up the fountain, of course."

"...Too much of a hassle. I leave things in your capable hands."



"What do you mean you're leaving it to me? Who do you think you're kidding here?"

"He~y!"

In the middle of their game of irresponsibility-hot potato, Ayato returned from the high school building.

"I just heard this huge boom...wai-, wha!? What the heck happened here!?"

Ayato shouted in surprise at the desolate scene before him.

"Some stuff happened, right, Sasamiya?"

"...?"

Too much had happened to make it worth explaining in detail.

"I'm still a little confused, but...Uwah-!"

Ayato, who had been guardedly glancing around until now, suddenly flushed up to his ears, casting his glance aside in a hurry.

His actions perplexed Julis for a moment's length before she suddenly understood.

The destroyed fountain was spraying water all over this area, which naturally included Saya and herself. Their clothes were thoroughly soaked.

Since they were wearing the thinner, lighter fabric that went with the summer uniform, the cloth adhered tightly to their forms.

Their curves showed clearly through.

Double-checking, the stripes on her underwear were clearly visible.

"Wha, wai-! D, don't look! If you look, I'll kill you!"

"I, I didn't see anything!"

"...Our clothes are all see-through. How scandalous."

"S-Sayamiya! Cover yourself! Wait, your underwear...?"

Julis looked over at Saya, whose clothes similarly stuck to her body. What she saw, however, left her stunned.

Even if their clothes were both soaked through, there was one stark difference.

"...It's rather unfortunate, but it's not necessary for me yet."

At Saya's unconcerned tone, Julis gripped her head in frustration.

"Hurry up and find something to cover her with! NOW!"

"R, right!"

Given the destruction of the fountain and the insatiable appetite for gossip of their school's students, they were certain to appear at any moment.

Watching Ayato race off into the distance, Julis sighed.

Chapter 5 - Demon Sword of the Black Furnace

The next day, Ayato made his way to the student council room in preparation for his Ogre Lux compatibility testing.

"Looks like things were rather difficult on you yesterday, Ayato."

The matter regarding yesterday's ambush on Julis had been reported to the disciplinary committee.

It was hardly surprising that the news had reached Claudia as well.

Although the incident had found its way online, as "Julis defeats mysterious attackers", Saya's name had been left out. It looked like no one cared about those who weren't members of the Top Twelve.

That was really only to be expected, though.

"How's the investigation? Have the perpetrators been apprehended?"

"-To be honest, that's going to be difficult. The disciplinary committee's already investigated the matter quite thoroughly, but the other party seems to have been careful enough not to have left any evidence behind."

"Even if this is Asterisk, yesterday's actions have clearly passed into the realm of criminal activity. Normally speaking, wouldn't we just hand things over to the police?"

The disciplinary committee was still a student-run organization, after all.

When their investigative abilities were compared to the actual police, they were, unsurprisingly, decidedly lacking.

"That's something of a problem as well. Asterisk's police, the Star Hunter Guard(Stjarnagarmr), can be a little high-handed."

"Although they wield executive authority in Asterisk, that jurisdiction does not normally extend to school grounds - upon this point, the six schools are agreed. Failing some large violation of the law, they may not intrude upon a school's autonomy."

The view of the schools was equivalent to the Integrated Enterprise Foundation's own. This was common sense in Asterisk.

Accordingly, until given express permission by a school, the Star Hunter Guard would not enter school premises.

"Precluding extraordinary circumstance, we, too, would prefer not to see them either."

"In order to avoid drawing unwanted suspicion?"

"An investigation would be rather inconvenient indeed," Claudia confessed openly.

"Although personally, I would like nothing more than to hand this over to the police. This decision is above my pay-grade, however. I just wish there was something more I could do for Julis..."

"Honestly, why is that girl so stubborn?"

She'd reported the incident to the disciplinary committee, but had refused all concern over her well-being.

Even the bodyguards the disciplinary committee had offered her had been turned down, with the reason being that she hadn't wanted any bodyguard who was "weaker than herself".

"In order to protect those things that are important to her, she'll go all out. When something new presents itself, she worries about losing all that she's already gained."

"The things that are important to her...?"

"Forget about it. It has nothing to do with the matter at hand, anyway. No matter how I look at it, I really can't just leave her be. Maybe I should try talking to her..."

At this moment a hurried knock on the door sounded.

"...My apologies, I'd forgotten there was another guest today besides yourself. Let's continue this conversation at a later time."

Claudia opened the door remotely with the console beside her, and in walked a most unexpected individual.

The other party, catching sight of Ayato, was no less shocked.

"Requests to use Ogre Lux weapons require a nightmarish amount of paperwork. If at all possible, it's best to do it all in one go. Right then, allow me to introduce you. This is-"

Claudia, smiling, began an unneeded introduction.

The simple reason being that those newly entering the room were none other than Lester and his two flunkies.

Startled by the sudden change in atmosphere, Claudia tilted her head in puzzlement.

"It seems you've already been introduced?"

"You could say that."

"W-why are you here?"

The plump yes-man, Landy, pointed at Ayato, stunned. Lester also cast a suspicious glance in his direction before quickly looking away.

"Oh, yes. We know each other."

The skinnier follower, Cyrus, nodded his head over and over.

"Let's hurry it up. I'd like to avoid wasting my time."

"How very rushed. In any case, it's true that time is precious. Please follow me."

Saying this, Claudia rose, and led them out of the student council room.

As they entered the hallway, Ayato raised a question which had just occurred to him.

"So what exactly are we about to do?"

"The process is simple. We test your compatibility with the Ogre Lux you select, and if it's greater than 80%, you can borrow it."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

That seemed rather straightforward.

"You really are stupid, aren't you? In practice, borrowing an Ogre Lux is nowhere near that simple."

Walking beside Ayato, Lester spoke in a tone brimming with scorn.

"If that's all there was to it, then everyone would be trying, after all. No, you have to either be a Page One or an active participant in the Festa; that is

to say, only the cream of the crop are even given the opportunity to try. If you don't fall into the above category, then regardless of whether or not your compatibility rating passes 80%, it may as well be 0% - it's not going to happen. As for whether this brat has the qualifications...I'm rather doubtful."

A high compatibility rating was the minimum requirement to draw out the abilities of an Ogre Lux. Unlike a Lux, which anyone could use, the powers of an Ogre Lux were of an entirely different level.

Ulm mana dites possessed an exceedingly high level of purity for a mana dite, and moreover, were capable of feats normally only possible for the Strega and Dante.

Simply speaking when it came to an Ogre Lux, the reason for the compatibility test was straightforward. The importance of one's fundamental compatibility numbers, a value wholly independent of the level of effort exerted, couldn't be underestimated.

"Wow, as expected of someone trying for their third time. That was definitely very persuasive."

Lester's smug look disappeared in an instant at Claudia's words, replaced by an expression of twisted rage.

"Hmph! This time I'll succeed!"

"That's right, Lester! You've just had bad luck up 'til now. Third time's the charm for sure!"

"You know it."

Landy's unabashed brown-nosing allowed Lester's mood to recover.

"Is a student allowed to try as many times as they want?"

"As long as they receive permission, yes. From the school's point of view, there's little point in letting one of their precious treasures be wasted on someone who can't use it properly. So yes, Top Twelve aside, the screening process is indeed quite intense."

So that's how it was. No wonder this was a privilege.

"It's not like the Top Twelve are without restriction either, though. If they can't meet the minimum requirements, then they will not be granted permission either."

They finally arrived at their destination, the subterranean equipment division located underneath the high school building.

As Asterisk was an artificial-island, their current location was technically underwater, and so there were no windows.

Ayato watched on in curiosity as the white-coated workers bustled back and forth.

"Pardon. I-I must apologize for just now."

Suddenly a voice came from behind.

Ayato turned to see Cyrus, a self-effacing smile on his face.

"Lester-san isn't a bad person...it's just that he can be a bit rough..."

Cyrus spoke with his head bowed.

"Oh, don't worry about it. There's no need for that."

"Because Landy-san has a similar personality, so they sometimes get a little out of control. For what the two said yesterday, I apologize."

"Oi, Cyrus! Stop wasting time!"

"R, right! I'll be right there!"

Lester roared at them from his position in the lead.

Cyrus again bowed his head, and raced to meet him.

It looked like in their group dynamic, Lester stood at the top and Cyrus at the bottom.

"Hah..."

Riding the elevator within to the lowest level, Ayato stepped out into what appeared to be a vast training room with a high ceiling.

At one end were innumerable hexagonal patterns placed side-by-side, while the opposing end was made of glass, revealing a flurry of busy

workers within, likely students of the equipment division. Landy and Cyrus were waiting on the other side.

"I'll go first. Is that fine?"

"I don't mind; how about you, Ayato?"

"No problem at all. Go right on ahead."

As far as Ayato was concerned, verifying the existence of the Ogre Lux his sister had perhaps used was his only reason for coming. Nothing else mattered.

Lester displayed his experience, proficiently manipulating the computer in the corner by the wall laden with hexagonal patterns. As a colossal window appeared, his face took on a serious expression.

"What's that?"

"It's a summary of all the Ogre Lux weapons that our school is in possession of. We currently have 22 of them - the most of any of the six schools."

"Oh."

"Besides simply the name and appearance of each Ogre Lux, the index also records their special abilities; all the data a potential user might be interested in. Those whose names appear in gray are those which have already been lent out."

"I see."

Ayato counted the number of gray entries.

"There are currently seven Seidokan students using an Ogre Lux, four of which are in the Top Twelve."

In other words, a full third of the current Top Twelve were Ogre Lux wielders. This made it quite clear just what kind of weapons they were.

"Alright, this one then."

At that moment, one of the hexagonal patterns lit up, slid over to Lester's position, emitted a low sound, and protruded forth from the wall.

It seemed to be the mechanism employed for Ogre Lux storage and delivery.

"Heh, what a pointless appearance."

"Pointless...?"

Claudia's words would probably sadden the designer.

"Hmm, strange...?"

Claudia's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"McPhail-kun, you've selected the Demon Sword of the Black Furnace(Ser-Vesta). Not again..."

"Demon Sword of the Black Furnace?"

"Indeed. 'Disintegrating all that it touches, when it pierces, the world shall turn to purgatory'. This was once an Ogre Lux most feared by the other schools."

"...Sounds like quite the weapon."

"Whatever its reputation, only a contractor can draw out its supernatural strength. There's something else you should know about it, though."

Claudia gave a bitter smile.

"-That's the weapon whose records have been altered."

"!?"

Lester removed the activation body from within, carrying it with him to the center of the room, where he turned to face the window. Ayato couldn't help but stare at the weapon in his hand.

"So that's it...the Ogre Lux that my sister may once have wielded."

The outward appearance of its activation body was nothing special. The only point worthy of note was the abnormal color of its Ulm mana dite. Lux mana dites were all of a uniform color, green, but Ulm mana dites came in a variety of colors. The Ulm mana dite of the Ogre Lux in Lester's hand, for example, radiated with a brilliant scarlet light.

"Alright, I'm ready."

Lester activated the weapon, and it slowly began to materialize. Gradually manifesting itself, before long, its hilt appeared in its entirety, from which sprang forth a blade of light.

Seemingly running contradictory to its naming, the Demon Sword of the Black Furnace was armed with a blade of white light. Furthermore, it wasn't simply a bladed edge, but rather an enormous blade of light.

As Ayato watched the blade form, his heart began to pound. He felt as though he were witnessing the birth of an unprecedented monster, and his senses tingled.

The feeling lasted but a moment, however, and was gone.

What was that...? Ayato pondered, before being broken out of his reverie by the sounding of the intercom.

「Compatibility testing is ready to go. Please begin.」

With permission to begin, Lester gripped Ser-Vesta tightly, and loosed a primal roar.

"Uoooooooooh!"

Ayato could feel Prana gathering, but Ser-Vesta evidenced no change.

「Current compatibility is 32%.」

The announcement caused the expression on Lester's face to change.

"DON'T YOU DARE LOOK DOWN ON MEEEEEEEEE!"

The muscles on his arm rippled and he bit down on his lips, displaying forth an iron determination to overcome, no matter what.

Alas, Ser-Vesta appeared none too taken with his approach, and, seemingly warranting it beneath contempt, it flashed with a violent burst of light that flung Lester away.

"Uaaaaah!"

Operating via some unknown force, Ser-Vesta hovered in the air, looking down upon Lester in scorn.

Its actions were those of a person flicking away a pesty insect which had deigned to land on their body.

"Rejected," Claudia murmured.

"I think you mentioned this before, but Ogre Lux weapons determine their own contractor...?"

"Indeed. And they will refuse anyone with whom they deem communication is impossible."

「Our last measurements read in at 28%..」

"It's not over yet!"

Lester, who had been thrown into the far wall, picked himself up, and grabbed Ser-Vesta once more.

"Uh-oh. I don't think Ser-Vesta looks well upon that power-hungry attitude. It's not the kind of weapon that will submit to force or command."

"You understand what's happening?"

"I also use an Ogre Lux, so more or less."

That was news to Ayato.

"Both the last time and the time before, McPhail-kun also chose Ogre Lux weapons of great repute, with the result being what you see now. These aren't the kind of fickle weapons that give in to a simple lust for power. Not that the desire to be stronger is wrong..."

Cutting her words off mid-sentence, Claudia turned to look at Lester.

It didn't matter what he tried; Ser-Vesta turned him into a human bullet each time.

"Shit! Why?! Why won't you obey me?!"

"It's likely that attitude that the Ogre Lux disapproves of. Well, although that Ogre Lux definitely has quite the strong personality, it's not like it doesn't heed commands at all."

"Really?"

"Although it's an older Ogre Lux, it's only had two contractors in its history - three, if you count 'her'."

"Onee-chan's..."

By this point, Lester couldn't even touch Ser-Vesta anymore.

If he so much as approached it, the light flung him aside.

「Compatibility is at 17%.」

Having heard just how low his compatibility numbers had fallen, Lester no longer hid his fury.

"GIVE IN! KNOW YOUR MASTER!"

His howl availed him not. This time, Ser-Vesta threw him yet farther still.

Having again been flung into the wall, no matter how you looked at it, this was a failure.

"Grr..!"

「Compatibility rating is dropping steadily toward 0! Continued attempts will prove dangerous, please stop!」

"Oh, this won't do. He's made himself hated."

Sounding flustered, Claudia rushed forward before suddenly coming to a halt.

Her reason for doing so was readily apparent; Ser-Vesta, still floating in mid-air, had begun to release a murderous heat.

Although Ayato stood some ten meters distant, he felt as if he was being roasted over an open flame.

「The object is completely out of control! Please evacuate!」

From the intercom came a cry of desperate urgency.

「The heat it's generating is rapidly increasing in temperature!」

Even without the announcement, Ayato could tell that things were taking a turn for the worse.

If things continued, being roasted by an open flame wouldn't just be a metaphor anymore.

"Ser-Vesta's blade is originally a construction of heat. Because it was used by someone unfitting, its powers are beginning to leak."

"What should we do?"

"You mean what should we do when an Ogre Lux rages out of control? I'll be frank; I have no idea. Although I've read about it happening before, this is my first time experiencing it. We should probably run?"

"While that sounds good to me..."

Currently the room felt like an intense sauna.

Beads of sweat, large and small, ran down his face. He felt Ser-Vesta's "gaze", as it were, upon him; its tip pointed toward him.

It looked like it'd selected Ayato as its target.

Though Ayato had faced down human opponents before, this was a sword. Such a circumstance was beyond expectation.

"Doesn't look like I have a choice."

Ayato stared down Ser-Vesta, and began to gather Prana. As the light began to accumulate, his body was wracked with pain, and his lip quivered.

Ser-Vesta met Ayato's stare, before suddenly rushing forward in a surprise attack.

It flew towards his head in an incandescent flash of acceleration, the brutal heat forcing Ayato to squint his eyes. He grabbed hold of its hilt, at which point it changed direction to take aim at his body.

Ayato promptly leapt to the side, the long scar on his uniform evidence of how close things had come.

"...I'm guessing this is the price you have to pay to deal with these things?"

"Oi!"

At Ayato's words, casually out-of-place, Lester unconsciously shouted a warning.

Ser-Vesta flew upward before reversing direction and stabbing downward, toward Ayato.

This was a flawless, unavoidable attack, or so it seemed until Ayato dodged at the very last moment, taking hold of its hilt once more.

"Hot!"

As you might expect, its heat had transferred through its hilt.

Even with his body protected by Prana, he still felt his hand be seared.

Refusing nonetheless to let go, Ayato stabbed Ser-Vesta into the ground.

"...I'm sorry, I hate it when people just can't take a hint; like you, I think."

As Ayato finished speaking, the heat in the room disappeared in an instant.

Ser-Vesta was now completely silent, as if its former actions were all an illusion.

"Fuu..."

Everyone was left too stunned to react, except for Claudia, who applauded.

"Just what I'd expect from you Ayato, well done. His compatibility rating-?"

「N-ninety-seven percent!」

"Great."

Claudia nodded in satisfaction, and turned to face Lester.

"That's how it is. I'm sure you're rather dissatisfied, but I believe you have no complaints?"

"..."

Lester stared at Ayato with disbelief in his eyes, before biting his lips in frustration, clenching his fist, and punching the ground.

"Alright, there we go."

Claudia helped Ayato apply antibiotics and ointment and placed a bandage over his wound before letting his right arm go.

"Are you sure you don't want to visit the infirmary? That kind of injury is something you should have them take a look at."

"Thank you very much, this is more than enough."

Ayato tried to clench his right fist; the pain was already mostly gone.

After what had just happened, Claudia's concern was natural.

"Even if you say that..."

The two of them were once more in the student council room.

When Ayato had taken ahold of Ser-Vesta, he'd suffer some minor injuries. In order to ensure he received some degree of treatment, Claudia had forced him to follow her back to the room.

The two were currently sitting on the guest sofa. Claudia, for some unknown reason, was practically glued to his body as she offered treatment. Ayato raised what he felt was the pertinent question.

"Is it really alright for me to use it?"

After the disturbance had been safely resolved, Ser-Vesta had been registered for Ayato's use.

Since the entirety of the registration process took two or three days, however, he didn't have it with him.

"With a compatibility rating of 97%, who's going to complain? Is it that you're not happy with Ser-Vesta?"

"Not at all. To be able to succeed the sword once used by my sister, I am more than pleased. It's just that..."

"You're worried about what McPhail-kun might think?"

Ayato thought back on the expression of supreme vexation on Lester's face as he'd left.

"Well, he clearly was the one who selected it first, but now it's being given to me."

"That can't be helped. While friendship and cooperation are hardly discouraged, remember that this city's true nature is one of competition. In order to maintain one's dignity and reputation, there are times when you simply have to accept things as they are."

"I sure hope he sees it that way."

Whether it was their first meeting or this one, Ayato's impression of Lester had not been a good one.

"Did something happen between the two of you?"

"To be honest, not just me. This involves Julis as well..."

Ayato explained the events of two days prior, when he'd become the third party in Julis and Lester's dispute.

"Haha. Lester's obsession with Julis is rather well-known."

"If he can forget any ill will toward me, then that'd be great. It's just that, with what happened to Julis yesterday, I'd like to avoid adding to her burden."

"...You think that the perpetrator of the attacks might be McPhail-kun?"

In response to Claudia's question, Ayato laughed.

"I never said that. It's true that Julis' attacker from yesterday was also large in stature, but to assume it was Lester from just that would be too much."

"But doesn't he have motive? After losing to Julis, and having her reject his requests for a duel, he definitely resents her greatly. That's something anyone can tell you."

"And that's exactly why I think it's not him. Lester bears a vicious grudge against Julis, and yet she always comes out the victor. He wants to demonstrate his superiority over her, something he can't accomplish if he hides and ambushes her; such a thing would be meaningless. Aside from that, I also don't feel like that way of doing things matches his style. I'd say he much prefers a straight-up duel with a crowd of onlookers watching."

"Then why would this create a problem for Julis?"

"Whoever the attacker is, they're targeting the chinks in her armor. That, of course, is only natural; Julis is profoundly strong. Were they to go after her directly, the probability of success would drop immensely. On the other hand, even if it is Julis we're talking about, once she begins a match, she has no choice but to focus all her attention on her immediate opponent."

"Perfect timing for a sneak attack."

"It wasn't until her duel with me or her match with Saya that she was ambushed. If provoked enough, there's the possibility she might battle Lester once more, opening herself up to attack."

"I see. What amazing insight."

Claudia nodded in admiration.

If it wasn't his imagination, her actions were those of a teacher, praising a student for doing well.

In other words, everything he'd said was within Claudia's realm of expectation.

The entire time, Claudia had maintained a perfect posture while facing Ayato.

"Ayato, given your good judgment, I have a favor I'd like to ask of you. Could you spare some time later this evening?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, sure. Is now not a good time?"

"What I have to discuss with you is private. I'll notify you of the exact time and place later on."

If it was just a matter of privacy, their current location ought to be just fine- Ayato's thoughts were cleanly seen through by Claudia.

"The walls have ears. A place like this, where intrigue is made manifest, cannot be considered a secure location."

Later that night, just before curfew, Ayato's cellphone sounded.

Unwilling to allow Eishirou to overhear their conversation, he quietly snuck out.

Thankfully, the high school buildings were all unlocked.

"I'm sorry for calling so late. After we separated, I had another meeting to attend to."

A screen appeared, through which a voice came through.

"It's fine with me, although are you sure it's not too late?"

Even if the doors weren't locked, it was still past the time they were allowed to leave their dorms.

"You're right, which is why the location's a bit troublesome. I'm going to need you to come over here in person."

"And where would that be?"

"My room."

"...When you say room, you mean your room in the dorms?"

"That's right. My room is on the south-eastern side of the building, on the top floor. I'll leave my window open, so come on up," Claudia said candidly.

"Last time I visited, I mucked things up rather badly."

Moreover, at least the last time he could claim ignorance. This time he would be in knowing violation of school policy.

"Not to worry, I'm different from Julis. I'm not going to fight you."

"...That's not what I was referring to."

There was no two ways about it; the student council president inciting others to violate school guidelines wasn't a good thing.

"Alright then. I'll be waiting."

"W-wait! Claudia!?"

The other party had already ended the call.

Furthermore, she'd rejected all his objections. Ayato held his head in his hands. He hadn't imagined things would go down this path. Admittedly, though, he'd been given a glimpse into Claudia's mindset, as well as seen the evidence of her trust in him.

Left without any other alternative, Ayato made his way over to the female dorms.

"If I get seen by Julis this time, there won't be anything left of me to find."

At first glance, the girls dorms were none too secure. This was only the case, however, because the school's choice of a security system couldn't be taken lightly.

For members of the Starpulse Generation, traditional security systems weren't something all that difficult to bypass. That said, were they to be too strict, they would interfere with the quality of daily life. Instead, Seidokan Academy opted for a different route.

After considering these points, it was decided that within the girls dormitory an alert system would be placed.

Any girl within the dormitory could trigger the alarm, immediately notifying the nearby guard station. This alert trigger could also be installed on the mana dite of each girl's Lux. For example, a girl might report that she'd "returned to find her room a wreck", from this inferring that "some unknown party had forcibly entered."

After receiving an incident report, the security guards required only an average of two minutes before arriving and dispensing harsh and unrelenting discipline.

Thinking of this, Ayato whispered a silent thanks in his heart for the silver-lining of the incident earlier, namely that Julis had not called for security.

Speaking of which, although Julis's alert system was definitely active at the time, she'd had the confidence to resolve matters on her own without outside assistance.

"Looks like I'm here. I've already been here once before, so I at least feel more familiar with the setting, but...doesn't doing this make me just a common pervert?"

Arriving at the dorm, he scaled an unnoticed wall like a gecko, taking care not to make a sound, before at last reaching the top floor and the designated room.

He lightly tapped on the window, but it was unnecessary. True to her word, Claudia's window was unlocked.

This exposed the flaw in the alert system - if a girl wanted to let a boy in, it was trivial to do so.

Though Ayato had his own thoughts on the morality of what he was doing, it seemed highly unlikely the security guards would look kindly upon his actions.

"Claudia? I'm coming in."

Ayato gave advance warning, but no response was forthcoming.

Since hovering at the window's edge was rather difficult, he took the prerogative in entering despite not having received an answer.

The room was far more spacious than his own room, and elegantly furnished. Even if this was technically a "dormitory room", it felt infinitely more like a room in a high-class hotel. The various decorations and odds and ends littered about the room were similarly high-class, giving one an appreciation for their owner's sense of aesthetics.

Said owner was nowhere to be seen, though.

"Don't tell me she's not here..."

On the side was a door to another room, likely the bedroom. As he considered entering, the door suddenly opened wide.

"Oh my, welcome. I apologize, I just finished showering."

"..."

From the newly appearing Claudia, wisps of steam gently rose. Moreover, she was currently only wearing a bathrobe.

This bathrobe was made of an appropriately light material, and her chest visibly swayed with each movement.

Furthermore, since the hem of the bathrobe was rather short, her thighs were clearly visible. Her skin was flush with a soft warmth, radiating a needless sensuality.

"I'm going to change. Please feel free to look around as you please."

Claudia's hair was still slightly damp, and in the light, seemed to glitter bewitchingly. As she carelessly passed by Ayato, his body stiffened.

(...How the hell am I supposed to stay calm like this!?)

Although he wanted to scream that aloud, it wasn't like he'd be able to avoid the situation with just that.

Furthermore, such cries would only make the situation worse.

"Thanks for waiting. Please, have a seat."

"...Got it."

The two of them maintained their silence as they entered the bedroom.

Ayato had had some sense of foreboding, but even he could never have expected that Claudia's "changing" had only resulted in the addition of a coat over her bathrobe. She took a seat on her bed.

"I don't really know how to put this, but you really should put on more clothes..."

"This is what I always wear in my room."

He felt it unbearably rude were he to simply continue to look at her, attired as she was.

Not that he believed she'd change anything just by his asking.

Sighing, he took a seat on the sofa. Claudia took the opportunity to prepare a wine glass into which she poured a ruby-colored liquid.

"There's plenty for you as well. Would you like some?"

"I'd prefer not to swallow mysterious substances if at all possible."

"Haha. Very wise of you."

It was better to stay away from that kind of thing.

"But still, this is quite the room. Is that one of the privileges of being a student council president?"

"No. Rather than the student council president, this is a privilege of being a Page One. All of the Top Twelve have a room like this, and what's more, living expenses are rather preferential as well."

"I see, so Claudia is also a Page One."

Claudia gave a lonely smile.

"I'm hurt. Should I take that to mean that Ayato hasn't the slightest interest in my affairs?"

"I-I'm sorry."

"Forget it. This position of student council president can be pretty troublesome at times; it's rare that I can speak freely."

"Then why did you accept the appointment?"

"Because I like troublesome things."

Claudia revealed a deep and profound smile, and gracefully crossed her legs.

The captivating sight unknowingly entranced Ayato for a moment, but he nonetheless maintained a calm disposition as he spoke.

"In other words...the favor you wanted to ask concerns these 'troublesome things'?"

"I guess the sooner we discuss things, the better. Please take a look."

Claudia fiddled with her phone, opening a screen in the air. On the screen appeared the visages of several students.

"These are students who have registered for the upcoming Phoenix. Although they aren't members of the Top Twelve, they fall among the upper ranks of the Battle Omnicon. They're students in whom we had placed the utmost expectations."

"...Past tense?"

"Indeed. They lost in battles which left them in the hospital."

She sighed, and closed the window.

"The reasons are varied; for example, accidents, or injuries sustained during a loss, etc. Here in Asterisk, this kind of thing is pretty commonplace. Nonetheless, our investigations have revealed a certain oddity common to these incidents."

"The interference of a third party, correct? Just like my fight with Julis."

"Exactly. Yesterday's attack was the first time they've showed themselves so openly; generally the preferred MO was a sniping like during your duel

with Julis. Given the uniformity of MO, the probability we're dealing with a single perpetrator is extremely high."

Ayato thought for a moment.

"Any evidence?"

"None. Furthermore, all of the affected parties have rejected any and all assistance."

"Why's that?"

"Well...the students at this school are, how do I put this? Simply put, they're rather peculiar members of the Starpulse Generation. They trust in their own abilities to a fault. They're all waiting until they're fully healed to hunt down the attacker on their own, and pay him back."

"No mistake, that is pretty troublesome."

"A fuller explanation would require looking at things from another point of view, but for the most part, that's pretty much it."

The difficulty was that among those students with a certain level of ability, there were definitely those who held positions among the disciplinary committee, but the attacker had clearly intentionally selected those students with lone wolf personalities.

"There's something else I need to mention. The disciplinary committee has already investigated both McPhail-kun and Landy Hooke-kun as possible perpetrators of yesterday's incident. They have no alibis."

"You don't think it was them, though."

"No, I don't. Nor do you."

Claudia smiled joyfully.

"There's something strange about what you just said. Why isn't Cyrus a suspect? The three of them are attached at the hip after all."

"Cyrus Norman-kun has a perfect alibi. He was at home the entire time, hard at work; his roommate can attest to it."

"Is that so...Well, without a clear next step, there's nothing we can do but let the other side make the first move."

"It's as you say. Fortunately, there is one thing we can be sure of. The identity of the next target is already known to us."

"...Julis."

"Right. This attacker takes advantage of the situation to take down his target, without needing to reveal himself. If he was a member of the Top Twelve, there'd be no need for all this. In other words, the perpetrator would have a difficult time in a direct confrontation, but somehow still needs to take down skilled students. From this, we can infer-"

Ayato filled in the pieces.

"They're acting under the direction of another school. Am I right?"

"Another school?"

"Moreover, they should be a student of ours. Since all the incidents have taken place on school grounds, it would have been far too noticeable and far too dangerous otherwise."

"But then..."

The relationship between the six competing schools of Asterisk - Seidokan Academy, St. Garrardsworth Academy, Allekant Academy, the World Dragon Seventh Institute, Le Wolfe Black Institute, and Queen Veil Girls Academy - could hardly be called good.

Since they were constantly competing with one another, such an outcome was only natural. That said, it wasn't to the point where they'd commit such blatantly illicit infractions against one another.

"We definitely can't discount the possibility. The provisions of the Stella Carta notwithstanding, history has shown that given the opportunity, no school would hesitate to take any actions they deemed necessary, no matter how deplorable."

Ayato's brow furrowed.

If he understood her correctly, "whatever they deemed necessary" seemed to refer to even attacking one's fellow students.

"We can eliminate both St. Garrardsworth and Queen Veil off the bat. Given their reputation, they have too much to lose to do something like this, and too little to gain. This sort of sneak attack is definitely typical of Le

Wolfe, but they're currently focused on the Lindwurm; I doubt they'd expend the necessary effort for this. That leaves only Allekant and the World Dragon Seventh Institute. ...Hmm, I'll look into this a little more."

"It's fine either way?"

"Yeah, we just need to be careful not to overstep our bounds in roping them in."

Having spoken this far, Claudia turned to look directly at Ayato.

"Truth be told, this Seidokan Academy is an organization directly managed by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation. Without explicit approval, the scope of our actions is rather limited indeed. The disciplinary committee is granted more autonomy, but should they act, there is the possibility of the other party noticing. The Integrated Enterprise Foundation keeps a pretty close eye on things."

Claudia shrugged.

"It's not enough to simply identify the school in the shadows behind our attacker; such a thing is meaningless. We need evidence of their collusions. Anything else is our loss, and believe me, the Integrated Enterprise Foundation is not forgiving of failure."

"In other words, until we have that evidence, we can't move on the attacker."

"Looking at it another way, until then, the probability of another attack is high. That brings me to the favor I wanted to ask. Ayato, could you stay by Julis' side and protect her?"

"Wha-?"

Ayato stared dumbly at Claudia in surprise at the unexpected request.

"Julis will be undoubtedly be attacked again. If she's alone when that happens, it's possible she won't be able to handle things this time. That's why I'd like to ensure she has the strength she needs by her side, in other words, you. Originally, however, this wasn't something I should entrust to a student..."

"Is there a reason it has to be me?"

"As you well know, that girl deliberately keeps her distance from others. Fortunately, though, you seem to be an exception."

"As far as that goes, it was only to the point of showing me around school, you know?"

Moreover, she always seemed to be mad at him.

"Hah...You really are thick, aren't you?"

Claudia laughed as she teased him, but Ayato maintained a sober expression.

"I know what you want to say, but...I really don't think I'm up to the task."

"Oh, and why's that?"

"My strength isn't enough for her to be able to rely on."

"How modest."

"I'm calling it as I see it."

It was indeed the case, after all.

Claudia stared Ayato down before finally sighing.

"As I said before, just do your best. If you feel things are getting out of hand, feel free to run."

"..."

"If nothing else, by standing with her, you at least give the appearance of additional combat strength, right?"

"...If you put it like that, then I understand. I'll accept but, let me warn you, don't expect too much. You just focus on identifying the attacker so we can pull the curtain on this show already."

"Alright, I'll do my best."

Relieved, Claudia smiled.

"On another note, why is it that you worry about Julis so?"

"As the student council president, isn't it only natural to worry about one's students?"

"And the real reason?"

"..."

Claudia didn't speak at first. Finally, bowing her head, she answered softly.

"I'm like any other student. I came here to realize my dreams. I'm simply acting in accordance with that wish."

"Wish..."

Claudia's words tormented Ayato.

Both Claudia and Julis were fighting for the same reason.

"Oh, that reminds me. I can't just ask a favor from you without giving you some kind of reward."

"Hmm? Oh, I don't need anything like that."

Ayato waved her offer away, but Claudia still rose up and approached him.

"C-Claudia?"

"Fufufu."

A bewitching smile on her face, Claudia circled around to Ayato's back.

Though he tried to stand in a hurry, she leaned in, and pushed him back down.

"Uwaah!"

"Seeing as this is a pretty rare opportunity, if you want me, it's ok, you know?"

"WHA-?!"

A sugary-sweet whisper entered his ear.

Warm breath tickled his throat as he was pushed back into the sofa.

As Claudia mounted Ayato, her bathrobe slowly slid back, revealing her shoulders and cleavage. In that dimly-lit room, a pair of damp eyes stared at Ayato.

Ayato worried that if things continued, he was doomed. Moreover, the other party was a half-naked girl, currently pushing him down. Careless movements could prove fatal.

"Don't worry."

"?"

Claudia took ahold of his hands, and placed them atop her chest.

"Mm..."

"!"

That this world held something so impossibly soft! The slightly moist skin adhered to the palms of his hands, and though there was just the barest contact between them, the feeling was indescribable. If things continued down this path-



"H, hold iiit-!"

Calling himself back from the pit which hung before him, Ayato dove past Claudia and to the door in an instant.

"S-sorry! Let's leave it at this for tonight!"

Though he hadn't the slightest clue what he was doing, he knew he had to escape from that situation. If things had continued...

He also wasn't sure what Claudia's intentions were. Had she been serious, or was it all a joke?

He'd best steer clear until he was sure. He thought of what his sister had said once before.

"How unfortunate. It's not like I didn't expect this, but I guess things just aren't that simple..."

As Ayato fled the scene, he heard Claudia's voice, but he couldn't decipher the meaning of her words.

"Seriously..."

Sticking near the fence as he escaped the girls dorms, Ayato sighed.

As that sensation yet lingered in his mind, Ayato shook his head vigorously.

"Nonono, I can't keep thinking about that!"

Conversing with God knows whom, he slapped himself with force.

When it comes to Claudia's "compensation", forget it.

Either way, it wasn't like he was about to ignore Julis' plight.

"She is, after all, the girl with the same look in her eyes as Onee-chan."

He now realized that that look revealed the ferocity of her determination.

That being the case...

"-Hey!"

"!?"

Hearing a voice call out from above, he froze.

Looking up, he saw Julis looking down from her window above.

"What are you doing down there?"

"...Um, well, this is..."

There was no way in hell he was going to tell her he'd just snuck into the girls dorms.

"Sorry, what was that? I couldn't quite hear."

Saying that, Julis leapt down.

She wore casual clothing, nothing formal. Her actions, in jumping down, were none too princess-like either.

"K!"

"...Is it going to be like this every time we talk?"

"Don't be stupid. Chasing you like last time was the first and last time for me. It's just more convenient this way."

As Julis finished speaking, she finally realized what she held in her hands.

Noticing it'd drawn Ayato's attention, she frantically stuffed it into her pocket.

"A letter?"

"Yeah, you could say that."

She didn't sound like she wanted to talk about it, but she nonetheless appeared quite joyful.

It was undoubtedly a letter from someone precious to her.

In this age of digital communication, a handwritten letter was a rare sight indeed.

Judging from this, it was likely its contents were meant to be private.

"So? What're you doing here, at this time?"

"-Taking a walk?"

"A walk?"

"It's one of my hobbies, you know."

That was no lie.

"Whatever, forget it. Hey, do you have some time this Sunday?"

"Sunday? I should."

Since he'd just recently transferred, he had no plans.

"Alright then. Why don't I show you around then, like I promised earlier?"

"That'd be great."

She seemed to have been referring to when she'd asked him to leave his day off open.

"Um, also...I-I'm just checking here, but...I'm the only you've asked to come with, correct?"

"Huh? Of course?"

"B, Because if someone unexpected turns up, t-that'd throw things off..."

Julis spoke rather haltingly, but he nonetheless understood what she was asking.

"If you're talking about Saya, there's no need to worry."

"...Why's that?"

"Don't you remember that Kyouko told her she had to make up lessons?"

At Ayato's words, Julis clapped her hands together.

"Ah, you're right! Yeah, that's right! Right then, I'll be taking my leave first. I'll let you know when and where later."

Mumbling to herself, Julis waved as she walked back inside, this time, through the front door.

"The day after tomorrow, is it? I doubt they'd attack outside of school premises, but it's best to be safe."

Sighing, Ayato also made his way back to the dorms.

Since he'd left his room empty at night, there was no way that curiosity-driven roommate of his would just let things go.

To change his mood, Ayato turned to watch the night sky, whose clouds covered up the starlit sky.

Chapter 6 - The Pair's Day Off

"Sorry for the wait, Julis. Hope you didn't have to wait long."

"Not at all; I just arrived myself. I was hoping to praise you for getting here early, though... Hey, what's with that face? That stupid look on your face is making you look even more stupid than normal, you know?"

It was a bright, sunny Sunday.

Arriving at the appointed location, the school's outer gates, Ayato was stunned by Julis' appearance.

She wore a stylish, dark-red miniskirt and thigh-high stockings. She held a parasol lightly in one hand. She looked drastically different from how she normally appeared, and radiated a youthful, feminine appeal.

Julis was a beautiful young girl, but her usual gallant words and actions detracted from that feeling. Now dressed in normal clothing, it was impossible not to notice her stunning good looks.

"...Is there something on my face?"

"U-uh, sorry! Er, no...it's just that you seem so different from normal."

"R...really?"

"Yeah, your look really suits you."

"Wha- I-idiot! Don't say such embarrassing things!"

Julis looked around frantically as her face flushed a deep scarlet.

"T-this is just something sent from home. I just thought I should dress in something suitable for the occasion. I-it's not like I chose this especially for you or anything..."

Although the flush of her face could be perceived as anger, this interpretation contradicted the complicated expression on her face and her coy manner. Pulling herself together, she returned her gaze to Ayato, and spoke in a tone filled with interest.

"I'm not quite sure how to say this, but...you really don't have any clothes, do you?"

"Oh, that. Yeah, to be honest, I've never really been one to follow fashion. These clothes are pretty old."

Ayato wore a T-shirt and a three-quarter sleeve jacket as well as a pair of well-worn jeans.

"I didn't say they looked bad on you...wait a sec."

"Hmm?"

Julis leaned in, extended a hand, and patted down his hair.

"Uwah! What's wrong?"

"Your hair was sticking up. Honestly, you're just like a child. Pay more attention to how you look, ok?"

As she spoke, Julis smiled innocently.

Ayato, on the other hand, felt his heart skip a beat.

"Alright, let's go!"

Unaware of Ayato's inner turmoil, Julis fairly skipped along in glee.

Asterisk's urban district was separated into two parts, an outer residential district and a central district.

The outer district utilized a monorail line which connected Asterisk's harbor, residential district, and each of the six schools.

In comparison, the central district's main form of transportation was a subway system. This decision was made in order to ensure that students' battles would not interfere with public transportation, even in the worst case.

The central district was further subdivided into the business district and the administrative district. In the center were located several amphitheaters.

Julis and Ayato were currently in the central district, and more specifically, the central stadium for the Festa.

"This is the self-proclaimed largest and most important arena in Asterisk. The greatest battles of the Festa are all fought here."

Julis stood in front of the gigantic oval-shaped building as she explained.

It boasted a maximum seating capacity of one hundred thousand people. When the Festa is held, all contestants will gather here.

"Although its outward appearance is meant to mimic the Roman Colosseum, they are two very different structures. There are three other large amphitheaters, and seven mid-sized ones. When it comes to the small ones, who knows how many there are?"

"Wow."

"According to regulations, battles occurring in the city center must be held within one of these arenas. In practice, however, that's not always the case."

"...People actually fight in the middle of the city?"

"Yeah."

"Isn't that really dangerous?"

Take, for example, Julis' wild attacks during their duel earlier. If it had taken place in the city instead, it'd have turned their surroundings to scorched earth.

"Those who live here have already prepared themselves for such occurrences. Spectators are the same. Only those who have given express written agreement to these conditions are allowed into the city. That said, if a store suffers any collateral damage, they'll be compensated for their losses."

"That sounds really harsh. Then again, all that aside, I guess it's pretty hard not to be drawn in by this place."

"To be able to set up a store here in Asterisk, founded and managed directly by the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, is an unparalleled form of advertising. Moreover, this central district is the heart of all activity during the Festa."

"To be frank, I don't think I'd like to live here."

"I agree."

Julis smiled wryly.

"So what would you like to see next? Would you like to keep looking around here?"

"No, that's plenty, thank you."

"Alright then, why don't we swing by the hospital as we make our way towards the administrative district. The healers in Asterisk are Strega and Dante with healing abilities; they're also responsible for things during the Festa. To keep things fair, though, they don't intervene unless things are really serious. If it's only something on the level of a fracture, you're stuck with normal medical practices."

The number of Strega and Dante with healing abilities was very small.

In order to ensure that each of the six schools would have equivalent opportunities to receive treatment, there was an agreement that all Strega and Dante with these abilities would serve in this central hospital under the direct supervision of Asterisk itself.

With the exception of difficult-to-treat cases, threats to life, or injuries with potentially permanent effects, students were required to undergo treatment at the hands of these special healers.

"After that...why don't we pass by the redevelopment district. The slums are located in that area, so it's not the safest of locations. Getting lost there can be dangerous."

The slums existed for several reasons, among which included those who had been denied admittance into the city and members of the Starpulse Generation who were currently fleeing the authorities; a true thieves den.

While it was true that it was hardly the safest of locations, it was equally true that such places were to be found anywhere large concourses of people gathered together.

"That reminds me. Saya once mentioned that she'd gone shopping only to find herself in a rather shady area. It was a large, rundown building with lots of sketchy shops within."

"...That's definitely the redevelopment area then. On that note, wouldn't you normally just shop at a normal store? Why would you go there to buy something?"

"Saya is hopelessly bad with directions."

At those words, Julis' face twisted into a malicious expression.

"He~h, speaking of which, how is it that you're always showing up in the strangest places? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black."

"..."

That was certainly the case.

Truth be told, when Saya and Ayato played together when they were young, they would frequently get lost.

"Anyway, next up is..."

"Hey, Julis. I did ask you to show me around, but how about we do lunch first?"

As Ayato watched Julis ponder a map, he offered an alternative.

The timing was just about right.

His stomach seconded his proposal.

"Mm...well, I guess it is about that time..."

Julis seemed slightly uncomfortable, however.

"Something wrong?"

"Oh, no...I don't have any problems with lunch, it's just that the restaurants around here are, well..."

"If the ones around here are a problem, why don't we just head over to the business district and choose one there? Is it a problem with money?"

He'd heard that when it came to the restaurants in the area, they could be rather expensive. That said, given the nature of this place, he wasn't exactly expecting to find a convenience store.

"No, it's not that- What to say?...I'm sorry!"

Julis suddenly bowed her head and apologized.

"It's not that I've never eaten around here before, but...if you're going to ask where we should eat, then I don't know where we should go."

"Oh, hmm..."

"I promised I'd show you around; such a failure is humiliating...but I'll look one up online right now!"

Flustered, Julis frantically pulled out her phone and opened a window.

It seems she was browsing a review site.

As Ayato looked on though, his jaw just about hit the floor.

Every restaurant she was looking at was super high-class. When compared to the prices you'd find wandering around the district, the differences were like night and day.

Moreover, they all required prior reservation.

"...Um, yeah, to be honest, those are all a little..."

"I-I know that their prices aren't normal! But these are the only places I know... If I have a choice at all in the matter, going somewhere I've never been before is a little scary..."

Looking closely, these were all world-famous restaurants.

Furthermore, they were all three Michelin star restaurants!

"Haha, alright, I get it. It's fine; let's just walk around, and we'll choose whatever place looks good, ok?"

"I-is that really alright?"

"If you're fine with it, then that's all that matters."

"My opinion's not the important one here. A...are you really not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

Ayato was confused by Julis' disheartened question.

"Because...this is clearly all my fault."

She seemed quite serious.

Seriously, was there any need to worry about such trivial matters?

"I've wanted to ask this before, but don't you ever tire of taking things so seriously, Julis?"

"...Even if you say that, this is just how I am," Julis sulked.

"You're burdened by so many things. It makes me worry whether you'll be crushed under the weight of all that responsibility."

"It's definitely not easy, but that's just my way of life. If you ask me, you're the one we need to worry about. So casual, and unburdened by responsibility. Are you sure you wouldn't like to take things more seriously as well? It'd do much to plant your feet on the ground."

Though her words were casually spoken, they pierced Ayato to the core.

"Hah...Well, let's just make our way over to the business district, ok?"

Ayato changed the topic.

Nor did Julis opt to continue that line of questioning. Instead, the two walked along the busy road toward their destination.

"Wow, that's a lot of people."

"Yeah, it's a day off, after all."

The clean, neatly-paved asphalt streets were littered with students. Although they were of course dressed in casual clothing, they all had their school badges pinned to their chests. Even if it was a day off, they still felt the obligation to do so.

The business district had specified times during which vehicles were denied entry, and so the streets were filled with pedestrians.

Shops filled both sides of the streets, and restaurants were to be found aplenty. From the signs and advertisements he could see, it seemed their prices were fairly normal.

"Alright then. Let's choose one around here."

Ayato turned to Julis...who had gone missing.

"...Huh?"

Gazing around, he saw a head of rose-colored hair standing a ways off.

"What's up? You gave me a heart attack."

Julis stood in a daze, only coming to when she heard Ayato's voice from behind her.

"Are we eating here?"

"Here..."



Julis was staring at a local branch of a large hamburger chain. Though it was, in a sense, as world-famous as the restaurants she'd been looking at earlier, in every other sense, they were worlds apart.

"It's not like I care, but...is this place really alright?"

"Yeah, here!"

At first, he assumed it was due to the curiosity of a princess, encountering a hamburger place for the first time, but the smoothness with which she ordered a set meal revealed the incorrectness of that assumption.

Ayato ordered a burger, fries, and a medium coffee for himself. The two of them selected a seat by the window to eat together.

"I know this is my second time asking, but...Julis, you're really a princess, right?"

"...Why do you ask?"

Her actions in making her selection and ordering had been undeniably practiced. In any case, the way in which she nibbled at the hamburger she held with both hands was certifiably adorable.

"I would think most princesses wouldn't select a hamburger joint to eat at, right?"

"That's just a stereotype. The evidence is right in front of you. It's pretty common, really."

"So that's how it is..."

Ayato munched on his fries, and leaned against the back of his chair.

The same flavor as when he was young. Indeed, the same flavor the world over. It filled him with nostalgia.

"-A friend told me about this place."

Breaking the silence, Julis spoke regretfully.

"A friend?"

"I do have friends; it's just that they're all back home."

Ayato suddenly recalled.

"Oh! That letter from before, that was from your friend, wasn't it?"

"Wha-!?"

Ayato's words caused Julis to choke, and, pale-faced, she patted her chest frantically.

"*cough* *cough* ahem! H, how did you know?"

"You really are an honest person."

"..."

Julis blushed fiercely.

One moment completely white, the next completely red; her complexion sure was busy.

"A-anyway. I found this place on that review site. What did you think?"

"What do I think? Someone sure has free time if they can upload a review of a place like this."

"Why's that? Wasn't the food pretty good?"

Julis appeared thoroughly perplexed.

...She seemed less and less like a princess by the moment.

"Anyway, I was wondering. Would you mind if we changed the topic to something a little more serious?"

"Hmm, what's that?"

Finishing her hamburger, Julis seemed quite relaxed and content as she returned Ayato's gaze.

"It's regarding the attack on you earlier."

Ayato recounted in full what Claudia had shared with him earlier. Seeing as she hadn't forbid him from disclosure, he didn't think there was any harm in sharing what he knew with the person in question.

Not that he made any mention of his promise to protect Julis, given the cold reception she'd given previously.

"I see; somebody's working for another school."

Julis mildly sipped her soda, seemingly unsurprised.

"I must be their final target, seeing as how they were willing to expose themselves this time around."

"Seeing how things stand, it'd be best if you kept someone by your side when you go out or duel somebody."

"I refuse. Why should I change the way I live my life just because of some petty crook?"

"...To be sure."

Such a reply was well within expectation.

"The only one allowed to decide where I go and what I do is me."

"-As fearless as ever, I see."

Suddenly, from behind Julis, a large shadow appeared.

"...Lester, huh? Eavesdropping is quite the nasty habit, don't you know?" Julis responded.

Ayato looked up in surprise. To even meet in a place like this on their day off; it seems they were fated to run into one another.

"It's not like I wanted to hear it. I just overheard as I was passing by."

Unsurprisingly, trailing behind Lester were his two lackeys.

"I heard that you were recently ambushed by a mysterious attacker. My guess is someone holds a grudge against you."

"I've never done anything to warrant that."

Julis reply was calm, but Lester still looked stunned.

"It's that very attitude that rubs people the wrong way."

"Whatever. If that's all it takes to set people off, then I will happily be their opponent."

"Heh, what boundless confidence. Well then, seeing as that's the case, then why don't we fight right now?"

"How many times do I need to say this before it finally sticks? I haven't the least desire to duel you again."

"Screw that! Hurry up and agree to fight me!"

Lester struck the table with force.

As the loud crash permeated the room, it fell silent.

"L-Lester-san! Fighting without permission isn't going to turn out well!"

"T-that's right, Lester! If you make a disturbance here, you'll draw out the Stjarnagarmr!"

Cyrus and Landy desperately tried to hold him back, but their cries fell on deaf ears.

"Intimidating others like this isn't good, you know?"

"Shut your goddamn mouth."

Lester never even glanced in Ayato's direction.

"That's not such a good idea. Don't you know? Julis was attacked twice in the last couple days."

"And?"

"If you start something here, you'll likely be seen as collaborating with the attacker."

That sentence pushed Lester into a furor.

"Don't screw with me! How dare you compare ME with that cowardly pissant!?"

Lester held Ayato up by his collar as he roared.

"Fine. It really seems you're the one who needs to be taught a lesson first."

"I have no desire to duel you either."

"Ha?"

"I have no reason to."

Casting Ayato aside, Lester clenched his fist and punched the table.

This time, the poor table split in two.

"First you try to compare me with that yellow-bellied weakling, and then you have the nerve to try and back out of this? Don't you have any balls?"

"It's as you say."

Ayato answered, uncaring.

"Bastard...!"

"Lester! C-calm down! We know how strong you are! You always destroy your opponents honorably, without tricks! There's no need to listen to the words of this gutless wimp!"

Lester held his fist aloft, ready to come crashing down, as Landy held him back with all his strength.

"T-that's exactly right! Everyone knows! Everyone knows you aren't the kind of person who'd ambush someone during a duel!"

Cyrus aided as best he could.

"Grr....!"

Lester seemed unable to restrain his rage for a moment, as he glared at Ayato with a look that could kill. Finally, however, he turned and exited the building with a swagger.

"Fuuu..."

"You really can't be underestimated."

As Ayato wiped the cold sweat from his brow, Julis laughed delightedly.

"Huh?"

"...It's nothing, forget about it."

Julis gave a wry smile and stood. She picked up a napkin and wiped Ayato's mouth.

"You missed some ketchup. Really, what a strange person."

By the time they started to head back, it was already dusk.

"Thanks for today Julis. I had fun."

"O-oh, is that so... Er, um, how should I put this? I was just returning a favor. There's no need to thank me."

As the sun set, the two of them slowly walked over to the subway station.

Approaching their destination, they noticed a commotion in that vicinity.

"Hmm? Something going on?"

Nearby, a group of students were fighting. From their direction came the sound of much swearing and insults. There looked to be more than ten people involved.

There was a crowd of onlookers watching the situation, but the vast majority of people simply walked on as if the matter was none of their concern.

"Le Wolfe students. I should have known; they're always doing moronic stuff like this."

Le Wolfe Black Institute, allegedly the most warlike of the six schools. Their school customs prioritized victory over all else, their official policies likewise.

For this reason, many of Le Wolfe's students were rather boorish individuals. Of those who grew up in the worst parts of the slums, the majority ended up at Le Wolfe.

"It looks like a gang dispute...Oh, wow, they've started to go at it."

The leader of one group rushed at the others; both sides held weapons aloft.

The individual members of the two groups split off and began individual battles.

"...This is bad. We're surrounded."

"What?"

As Ayato was about to answer, he was suddenly charged from behind by a dagger Lux-wielding thug.

"That was close."

Sidestepping dexterously, Ayato dodged the attack. It was abundantly clear that his target had indeed been Ayato.

Furthermore, at some point, the gang fight had ceased to be.

Instead, Ayato and Julis now found themselves surrounded by those very same Le Wolfe students.

"Those Le Wolfe blockheads often use this style of sneak attack to ambush others. For example, the way they were using that 'fight' as an opportunity to surround their true target, using the excuse that they were 'pulled into the commotion'. This is my first time experiencing it firsthand, though."

Julis spoke while calmly dodging her attackers.

It seemed their 'fight' was just for show.

The members of what had originally been two groups had now consolidated into a single large group. From within their ranks, piercing glares targeting Julis and Ayato could be felt.

"...How is it that trouble always finds us?"

"Because these bastards are always doing things like this, so even on the off-chance that they're caught by the Stjarnagarmr, they'll be able to explain things away."

They would, of course, still be punished, but that punishment would be rather light.

"Does this mean that the people who attacked Julis were from Le Wolfe?"

"Hmph. No, they're just thugs-for-hire. As long as you have money, they'll do anything. That of course includes all of this."

As a Lux arrow flew past her, Julis bared a fearless smile.

"It looks like they're all just trash."

"So? What should we do about this?"

Though he already knew what her answer would be, he felt it best to ask nonetheless.

"Isn't that obvious? This is self-defence. Let's give them what they want."

"Please try not to go overboard."

It looked like this fight was for the purpose of forcing Julis to expose openings.

That guy was definitely hidden here, waiting for his opportunity.

"Don't worry. For guys of this level, there's no need to let my guard down just to take care of them."

Julis' surroundings burst into flame.

"...At least aim for medium-rare, and not well-done, pretty please?"

He hoped their attackers got the message.

Honestly speaking, these Le Wolfe students weren't anything special.

The moment they saw flames appear, they retreated into the subway station in disorder.

As they retreated, they heard cries of "That's the Gruene Rose!" and "I-I never heard anything about this!". It seems they hadn't been informed of their target's identity.

"Hmph. That wasn't even enough for a warm-up."

Julis brushed her hair to the side, utterly ignoring the pile of bodies that littered the floor, and turned her gaze to Ayato.

"-And what the heck was that?"

"W-what do you mean?"

"That utterly repugnant performance during the fight! You couldn't even deal with opponents of that level?!"

Julis' wrath was deserved.

Unlike Julis who had easily dealt with her attackers, it was all Ayato could do to avoid injury.

Though individually they were weak, their numbers had been enough to keep him tied up.

"Even if you say that, that's the limit of my ability."

"..."

Julis was stunned speechless for a moment, before finally sighing.

"I guess I'd raised my hopes too high."

The disappointment in her voice was evident.

Ayato forced a smile.

"Forget it. Let's interrogate these guys while we have the chance."

Julis looked over the fallen students before lifting a student with a pompadour to his feet. This was the one who'd been the leader of the group.

"Hey, just how long are you planning to sleep? You'd better get up unless you want to see what fire does to your hair."

"Aaaaaaaaaah!"

Her threat worked. The student opened his eyes.

"Make this simple. Who hired you?"

"I-I don't know! I just received the commission; I don't know anything else. I don't even know why!"

"The guy who hired you; what did he look like?"

"He was dressed all in black, very large, very tall. I didn't see a weapon, though!"

"And his voice?"

"V-voice? I-I don't remember."

"What did he say?"

"He didn't speak a word. He'd written his request on a piece of paper which he handed to me along with the money."

"On a piece of paper...? What did it say?"

"It said this was the initial payment. The rest of the payment would hang on the outcome."

"Outcome..."

As Julis pondered his words, the student suddenly shouted.

"T-that's him! That's the guy!"

"!"

As Ayato and Julis turned to look, the shadow raced away.

Though they'd only caught the briefest glimpse, it was undoubtedly their black-clothed attacker.

"Stop!"

Julis started to chase after him.

"Julis, let's corner him!"

Julis glanced backward in response, but never stopped moving her feet.

She seemed to have lost her head. Normally, Julis wouldn't engage in such actions which skirted the boundaries between bravery and stupidity.

In other words, she'd finally showed the opening her attacker had thus long been waiting for.

"What?!"

As she entered a narrow alley, she realized too late her attacker was lying in wait, his axe at the ready.

Though Julis dodged his attack, further in still was yet another attacker, waiting in ambush.

He held in his hands an assault rifle Lux.

"Ugh...!"

Facing that torrent of Lux small arms fire, Julis tucked into a roll that carried her past.

Unbelievable reflexes.

(Now!)

Julis and Ayato caught the black-clothed attacker between them-

"!?"

His peripheral vision caught sight of another shadow, hidden atop a nearby roof.

(There's three of them...!)

Moreover, his target wasn't Julis.

-It was Ayato.

The arrow of light flew toward Ayato.

A perfectly-timed sneak attack.

Ayato, caught in mid-air, was unable to dodge, and could only use his Lux's activation body as a shield to ward off the strike.

The arrow glanced off his Lux, skimmed off his clothes, and missed. It had been a narrow miss, and his Lux was now useless.

"Fuu..."

It seemed this group of attackers was consciously seeking every opening. Their personalities were rather contemptible indeed.

"Hey, you alright?!"

"More or less, although my clothes are down for the count."

As Julis rushed over, a tense expression on her face, Ayato gave a bitter laugh as he looked around. The attackers were nowhere to be seen.

Honestly, their speed at beating a retreat was unparalleled.

Moreover, they weren't alone. The Le Wolfe students had similarly vanished.

"...The Stjarnagarmr should be here soon. We should go."

"Can we?"

"We were just defending ourselves, so we need not worry on that point. That said, explaining is just too much of a hassle. Anyway, our hard-fought clues seem to have vanished without a trace, we can't just waste time here."

As Julis spoke, her eyes burned with fury.

"They dared to do this much, and yet we couldn't do a thing. There's no way I'm just going to forget this."

"...Madam Target, would you be so kind as to not do anything stupid?"

"Hmph."

That seemed to signify her assent.

Hmm. I'd better report back to Claudia.

"By the way, do you still have some time?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I do."

Nightfall was coming soon. Julis gave Ayato a quick look of appraisal.

"Alright then, please follow me to my room for a bit."

"...Huh?"

There was no way he could just openly walk into the girls dorm.

"Pardon me...*sigh* I hate that I'm so used to this by now."

Ayato again jumped up to Julis' window and entered.

Not only was this not his first offense, it was clearly his third.

Was it really possible that the legendary security guards of the girls dorms were yet unaware?

"Ah, you're here. Please wait just a moment."

Julis, who'd returned to her room first, was busy scrounging for something. Ayato knelt in the windowframe, looking in. It was, as expected, rather spacious.

This room was like Claudia's, a Page One special.

The decor of the rooms, however, was decidedly different.

The first thing you noticed upon visiting Julis' room was the greenery.

The inside was filled with flower pots, almost like an arboretum. Their placement was carefully architected so as not to hinder movement. Several of the flowers were in full bloom, and the sight of them calmed one's mood.

"...Able to just calmly look around like this, things sure are different from last time."

What floated to the top of his mind then was the memory of that pale flesh, that underwear-clad visage-

"Alright! I found it!"

"Uwah! I-I'm sorry!"

"...Why are you apologizing?" Julis asked, puzzled.

"Uhhhh...Nothing! More importantly, what did you call me here for?"

It wasn't like he was trying to hide anything; this was an honest question.

Although it wasn't yet curfew, the sun had already set. Just like during the time with Claudia, finding himself in a young girl's room at night was bad for his mental health.

"Great, let's get started. Please take your shirt off."

"WHAT!?"

Ayato unconsciously pulled back a step, nearly falling out the window in the process.

"J-J-J-Julis?"

"What's the problem? Hurry up..."

Julis suddenly stopped mid-sentence as she realized just how she'd phrased things, before blushing furiously.

"Y-you idiot! G-g-get your mind out of the gutter! I was trying to say I'd help you fix your shirt!"

"Fix my shirt...?"

Ayato finally realized.

The attack from the incident earlier had ruined his clothes.

"Fix my shirt, huh. You know how to sew, Julis?"

"It's not like I'm an expert or anything, but I can at least do that much," Julis answered, frowning.

"It happened because of me. I don't want to owe you anything else."

"Well, if you put it that way. Alright then."

Ayato obediently stripped off his T-shirt.

Julis pulled out a needle, and in a rather haphazard manner, started to sew.

Her technique was undeniably poor, but she'd clearly had some prior experience.

"Let me guess. Your friend taught you that?"

"...Yeah."

Julis never looked up; she simply nodded in the affirmative as she continued to work.

"I can tell."

Ayato watched for a moment longer, and deciding that Julis had things under control, started to look around.

A room entirely different from Claudia's, though just as large. It had been cleaned with great care.

Near her bed was placed an ornate desk. In the corner of the desktop sat a vase, filled with roses. By its side was something rarely seen in their time - photographs.

Leaning in for a closer look, Ayato saw what looked to be sisters, girls aged several years apart. From their appearance, it seemed they had lived quite well.

There was, however, one figure who stood out from the rest. She was attired in clothes as plain as the rest, but her bearing was evident even from that still photograph.

Adorning her face was a genuine, brilliant smile, just like the others; her hair, a beautiful rose.

"So Julis, the friends you mentioned...I'm guessing these are them?"

"Hmm...? H-hey you! Don't just look at other people's things without asking!"

Julis stormed over, snatching the photo from out of Ayato's hands.

"The one in the center; it's you, isn't it?"

"..."

Julis glared daggers at Ayato before finally sighing and returning the photo to its place atop the desk.

"-That's right. Those are my friends."

Having answered, Julis returned to her seat and resumed her needlework.

"Despite how I look now, I was quite the tomboy when I was young."

"How you look now..."

When she was young...? Rather, it should still be the case...

"You have something to add?"

"...Never mind. Don't let me interrupt you."

"...When I was young, I'd often run away from the palace. The reason, more or less, was that I was just bored. Even if I'm of royal blood, we're just a branch family anyway. When they restored the monarchic system, it seems they found that all direct descendants had since passed on, and thus it fell upon us."

Julis' hands never stopped their work as she continued her story.

"One day, however, I ran somewhere particularly far and got lost. As I wandered the roads, I found myself in the slums. Although Lieseltania isn't a dangerous place, but for a well-off young girl to find herself in such a place...well, you can imagine."

"How were your powers back then?"

"Ha. About the level of a cigarette lighter, if that. Absolutely useless. Well, actually, given that I hadn't any combat experience back then, even if my abilities were as they are now, they'd still have been of no value. Anyway, long story short, some rather unsavory types found me, and chased me

into alley. All I could do was cry in helplessness. In that circumstance, when all seemed lost, those girls saved me. Can you imagine how I felt at that moment? To me, they were both savior and hero."

Julis voice was filled with emotion.

They weren't just her feelings back then, but had remained so even until now.

"It wasn't until we'd returned to the palace that I learned they were from an orphanage in the slums. Every time I'd leave the palace, I'd head straight there. At first, they were, of course, distant; however, I persisted and we became fast friends."

As she continued to speak, Julis' voice took on an increasingly nostalgic tone.

"Did they know you were a princess?"

"No, I didn't tell them. The Sister knew, though."

"And your family?"

"Of course people talked, but by that time, my parents had already passed, and so I didn't care what they said."

"Then...?"

"Hmm? Oh, you didn't know? The current king of Lieseltania is my elder brother, the previous being my father. Admittedly, my memories of them are rather fuzzy by this point."

"So that's how it is..."

Ayato had lost his mother as well, and thus he well understood how hard it was to know what to say in such a situation.

"Investigating afterwards, I was shocked to find that that orphanage had been founded via a fund that my mother had left behind. I felt it was surely the workings of fate."

Julis' hands suddenly ceased their movement.

"The money she left for the orphanage has long since been exhausted. Every year, new orphans arrive, and so each new year is harder than the

last. And so I came here. This time, it's my turn to help them, my turn to protect them. What they need most, after all, is money."

"B-but-

"Let me make something clear. No one asked me to do this. I'm doing this of my own free will, for my own sake. The dream I'm fulfilling is my own."

Julis spoke with great feeling, her determination staunch and resolute.

No wonder no one had asked it of her; she was that kind of girl.

The question Ayato wanted answered the most was not that, however.

"That wasn't quite what I was asking. Is there really no other way?"

"Other way?"

"I mean, there's no other way for you to obtain the money you need? Aren't you a princess?"

Julis shrugged, and answered.

"The money belonging to the country isn't for me to spend. Our living expenses are dispensed from a fund with a predetermined use. Our country has long been but a mere puppet of the Integrated Enterprise Foundation; there's not a chance in hell they'd approve the 'wasteful' expenditure of money that would net them nothing in return. That was why the fund my mother left behind was cut in the first place. Our people are decidedly indifferent on the matter."

The Integrated Enterprise Foundation had but one focus, economic activity.

To this end, they'd even gone so far as to warp humanity's sense of morality and ethics.

They'd spared no expense in slowly but surely altering public opinion, and slowly but surely brainwashing the world.

-That was the founding principle of this city itself.

"They lavish money on my person, but I personally have no money to use as I will. I have to earn it myself. Fortunately, I was born a Strega. Furthermore, my title as a princess helped me find admittance at this school. This ornament of a title definitely has its uses."

Julis mocked herself with a scornful, bitter laugh.

"The existence of this city is repulsive. Students fight, and the world watches. Desire lurks at every corner, and it has grown fat by devouring the dreams of others. And yet it is for that very reason that this is the place where all wishes stand within reach. Here I will make my stand, and here I will realize my dream - that is why I fight."

As she finished speaking, Julis laid out the shirt in front of her.

It was a little - no, very poorly - done, but it met the minimal standards for repair.

"Good. Now bring this along home with you."

"...Mm. Thank you, Julis."

"This way, we're even."

"Definitely."

This wasn't somewhere it was safe to linger any longer anyway.

At that moment, Ayato noticed another object, folded away in the corner of the desktop. A handkerchief.

That handkerchief had brought the two together. Ayato now understood just where that handkerchief had come from.

Julis followed his gaze, and smiled as she gently took the handkerchief into her hands.

"This is something my friends at the orphanage gave me on my birthday. It's a joint work by everyone there. This ugly part was done by my best friend."

The other party was, without a doubt, a most important person to Julis.

Smiling bashfully, "this is my treasure," she said, returning it to its place.

That sad smile filled Ayato's heart with pain.

An important existence, one that must be protected - a life calling.

"I'll see you tomorrow then."

Putting on his shirt, Ayato waved farewell, and jumped through the window.

(...A reason for fighting, was it?)

Ayato muttered to himself deep within his heart.

Chapter 7 - Liberator

"What's the matter, Amagiri? You've been in a daze all morning."

It wasn't until Eishirou, walking by his side, shouted, that Ayato finally came to.

"-Oh, it's nothing. Don't worry about it."

He waved off the concern, putting on a smile for show.

"...Fine. Have it your way. You know you've been acting up ever since last night?"

"I'm just a little tired is all. Anyway, let's hurry up or we'll be late."

"No need to rush. We should be good on time."

Even if he said that, the hallways were already clear of students.

Indeed, they arrived at their destination without a moment to spare.

"I even tried to wake you up, but you went straight back to sleep! That's the only reason we had to rush."

"What's the big deal? We made it on time, didn't we?"

"That's not the problem- Oh, good morning, Julis."

"..."

"Julis?"

"Eh? Oh, morning."

Flustered, she hid a letter she held in hand in a hurry, and avoided meeting his gaze.

"...?"

"Alright, alright, everyone please be seated! I'm going to take attendance now."

Though Ayato was concerned about Julis, with Kyouko's bloodlust permeating the classroom, he didn't dare follow up on that concern.

Julis didn't get any better as class started. She didn't pay any attention during class, seemingly distracted by something else.

"Everything alright, Julis?"

After school, Ayato found an opportune moment to approach Julis, but she wouldn't face him.

"Sorry, I have something to do."

"Huh? H-hey wait a sec, Julis?"

With Julis deliberately ignoring his attempts to get her attention, he could only watch helplessly as she left the room.

"What just happened...?"

"Oh, how awful. She seems to have returned to her old self."

"Old self...?"

Eishirou leaned in conspiratorially and answered his question.

"Before you came, that's how the Princess always acted. She gave off this aura of 'don't concern yourself with me'. Here I was, thinking things had finally take a turn for the better, but it looks like we're back to square one."

"..."

While Ayato was still worried about Julis, he figured it best to report back to Claudia about yesterday's incident. He could also use the opportunity to ask her her thoughts on Julis.

"My, what an unexpected guest. How can I help you?"

As he entered the student council room, Claudia greeted him with a smile.

"They came looking for us again yesterday."

"So I hear. It seems they employed Le Wolfe students this time around."

"Word travels fast."

That wasn't what needed to be discussed, though.

"...More importantly, I've got a number on our mysterious assailant."

His words took Claudia by surprise.

"Truly?"

"Yes, I'm pretty sure I'm right."

Leaning in, he whispered his conjecture into her ear. She paused for a moment, deep in thought.

"Now I get it...OK. I'll look into it. I hope everything goes smoothly..."

The worried expression on her face didn't disappear.

"Something wrong?"

"Did Julis figure it out as well?"

"It's not like I've confirmed it with her, but I don't think she'd have missed it."

"Where is she now?"

"She said she had something to do, she had to go first- Shit!"

Ayato finally connected the dots.

Given Julis' personality, and the fact that she'd likely realized who the culprit was, there was no way she'd just let things end there.

"...It seems this time things have gotten a little troublesome."

"But what do we do now? Without evidence, the culprit can just lie about their role in things..."

"No, with things having reached this point, they can't pretend nothing's happened anymore. More than likely, they'll try to silence Julis personally-"

"Don't tell me- That letter from this morning!"

"Letter?"

"When I came in this morning, Julis was reading a letter. She was quite intent on hiding it, so I was rather suspicious."

Claudia paled.

"We need to find Julis now."

"But where do we look?"

Even if Asterisk was an artificial-island, it wasn't small by any means. An uninformed search would be no more fruitful than searching for a needle in a haystack.

"Let's first check whether or not she headed back to her room. If the culprit was indeed the one to call her out, then they'll likely have chosen somewhere off the beaten path, where people aren't likely to walk by. That should help us narrow our search."

Claudia pulled up a map of Asterisk.

"-Ah, wait a moment."

Ayato's phone suddenly rang.

Thinking it was Julis, he frantically answered.

"...Ayato, save me."

Unfortunately, the voice came from none other than a frowning, frustrated Saya.

"Saya? What's wrong?"

"I'm lost."

This clearcut answer gave Ayato a headache.

"You're lost again? ... I'm sorry, but I have more important things to worry about right now; I need to find Julis-"

"...Riessfeld? I just saw her."

Ayato and Claudia traded glances.

"Really?"

Saya nodded in the affirmative.

"Saya! Tell me, where did you see her last? Or rather, where are you now?!"

"...If I knew where I was, I wouldn't need your help, now would I?"

-Right.

"Excuse me, Sasamiya-san. Would you mind moving the camera around a bit so I can see your surroundings?"

Saya was slightly confused by Claudia's request, but she nonetheless did as asked.

"That's just outside the redevelopment zone. Between here and there, there aren't too many options. That narrows things quite a bit."

That was Claudia for you, a simple glance was sufficient.

"Thanks, Saya! You really saved us!"

"...I still need to be saved."

"Oh, that's right. Hmm..."

Ayato was torn. On one hand, he felt he should go get Saya, on the other hand, if the attacker really had called out Julis, she was in grave danger. Even if he gave Saya directions, however, it was unlikely she'd be able to arrive safely.

"I'll go pick up Sasamiya-san. Ayato, you go to Julis."

"Sorry, and thanks."

"None needed."

Claudia smiled charmingly, and marked a potential spot on the map.

Although she still worked with remarkable efficiency, since she lacked her usual calm demeanor, the anxiety she felt was clear.

"...Why didn't Julis say anything?"

Julis' personality was such that she hated to rely on anyone else. Unfortunately, however, that same tendency had created this very problem...

"As expected, I guess she doesn't feel she can rely on me, huh?"

"Precisely the opposite."

Overhearing Ayato's mutter, Claudia, still focused on the map, laughed.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Didn't I say this before? That girl will go all out to protect the things she holds dear. It seems you now fall under that category."

"Protect...me...?"

At that moment, it finally all came together for Ayato.

He felt enlightened; it had finally all become clear.

"I see now..."

He thought of that summer night.

Of his sister's words: that she'd protect him.

Of his words: that he'd protect her.

Though he'd failed to keep that promise-

"...So it's really that simple."

He finally knew.

What his "mission" in life was.

"Got it!"

Claudia shouted in elation at that moment, and forwarded the map to his phone.

"Great!"

He'd best start with the closest location first.

"Oh, wait just a second. Before you go-"

As Ayato prepared to dash off like a bullet, Claudia called him back.

"-'That' is ready. Please take it with you."

At the same time, Julis arrived at an abandoned building in the redevelopment zone.

The building, in the process of being torn down, was enshrouded in the murky darkness of dusk. Some of the walls and flooring had already been broken down, and the area looked quite open. However, the piles of scattered rubble and debris left much hidden from view.

But Julis, unhesitating, entered without pausing. The light of the setting sun, cast a strange shadow on the interior of the building. Julis wore a grim expression as she silently walked in.

-Just as Julis entered the deepest part of the building, a pile of rubble, piled nigh to the ceiling, suddenly fell without warning. The pile was large enough to easily flatten a young girl like nothing so much as a pancake, but Julis didn't even bother to look up as she spoke.

"Bloom proudly - Red Parasol Flower of Isolation(Red Crown)."

Appearing above Julis' head was a pentagonally-shaped flower which diverted everything which fell. Its appearance was that of an umbrella formed of flame.

"You didn't really think that would work, did you? You'd better show your face...Cyrus Norman."

The moonlight shone on the ceiling leading directly to the roof.

The deflected girders pierced into the floor. As dust scattered from the impact, a young man slowly revealed himself.

"How rude. Aren't I allowed to have my fun?"

The slim young man - Cyrus Norman - mockingly dipped his head in a bow.

"I have to say I'm surprised. I never would have expected that you'd uncover my identity."

"That's your own fault. You let it slip yesterday."

"Yesterday, you say? And pray tell, just when did I do that?"

Cyrus tilted his head, questioning.

Julis maintained her calm demeanor and answered.

"Yesterday, when we ran into one another in the business district, Ayato was taking jabs at Lester. At that point, in order to defend him, you said

something: 'Everyone knows you aren't the kind of person who'd ambush someone during a duel'."

"...And what of it?"

"How would you know that the attacker was someone who ambushed others? The first attack - during the duel between Ayato and myself - was never mentioned in the news."

"The second time was definitely in the news, though. I saw it myself."

"You're right, it was definitely mentioned in the news. However, the news only said that I repelled an attacker. Not only did it not mention that Sasamiya was present, it didn't even mention her name. That really was stupid; she was, after all, the one who fought off you guys."

"..."

Cyrus continued to stare at Julis with an unfathomable look in his eyes.

"You still don't understand? The news never mentioned a third party. How could you know that I'd been 'ambushed during a duel' unless you'd either personally seen that duel ongoing or heard from someone who had? Either way, you're guilty."

"Ugh...what a blunder. Let me guess, that guy provoking Lester...that was all on purpose, right?"

"That's quite probable. That much he's capable of."

Julis stuck her chest out proudly.

"Hmm...It looks like my decision to switch targets to him was correct after all. If I continued after you, he'd only get in the way."

"Wha-?! You...!"

"Hehehe. You see, I already knew. The reason you came here was to make sure I wouldn't get away with it."

Cyrus leisurely spread his hands like a magician as Julis gritted her teeth.

This morning, she'd found a letter stuffed into her desk. It read, "The next target will be the one closest to you. If you don't want to see that happen, come to this location."

"Hurry up and finish whatever it is you want to say."

"What's the rush? If you ask me, we should talk this over, like adults. That's why I called you out here, after all."

"Even now, you're just going to continue to spew this bullshit? Just cut the crap already."

"No, no, no. You don't understand. I'm very serious here. I have no great desire to engage in a direct confrontation with you either."

Cyrus gave a seemingly frantic explanation, though his tone was as unhurried as before.

Before making her way here, Julis had investigated a little. Cyrus wasn't listed in the Battle Omnicon, and had never participated in a ranking match before. His strength was an unknown quantity.

Moreover, there had verifiably been at least three attackers. Even if one of the black-clothed assailants was Cyrus, that still left two more.

"-I understand. I'll at least hear you out."

Julis figured it best to let her opponent reveal as much of his hand as possible.

"That's better. To be honest, we're the same, you know? You and I. Our goal in coming here is money. For that reason, I've always thought we'd make quite the team."

Cyrus nodded his head, an egotistical smile on his face.

"I think you already know what it is I want - forget about trying to register for the Phoenix. The other thing would be for you to forget about this entire incident."

"And what's in it for me?"

"Is the continued wellbeing of you and Amagiri Ayato-kun not enough?"

"You must be joking."

Julis bluntly refused.

"All I need to do is kick your ass right here, and call it good. Anyway, even if I did keep things secret for you, I'm pretty sure the student council has already puzzled out what's been going on."

"I'm not worried on that count. There is, after all, not a whit of evidence against me."

"You seem pretty sure of that."

"It's fact."

Cyrus and Julis traded glares.

At that moment, a deep and furious roar came broke their silent standoff.

"What the hell is this, Cyrus?!"

"...Lester?"

Striding in with a heavy step was none other than Lester McPhail.

Julis prepared herself for an incoming attack, but none was forthcoming. Lester's rage was not directed at her, but at Cyrus.

"Geez, you've really made us wait, Lester-san."

"I came because I'd heard that Julis had finally accept my request for a duel, but...was what I just heard the truth? The one who ambushed Julis was you?"

It seemed he'd overheard their conversation.

"Yes, that's right. What of it?"

"The hell do you think you're doing?! How could you do something like this!?"

"I don't know how to answer you except to say I was entrusted with this charge."

"Entrusted...?"

To Lester's expression, already a mix of shock and outrage, was added another emotion - confusion.

If this was an act, he could win an Oscar for this performance. Julis knew, however, that Lester wasn't that kind of scheming person. Sighing, Julis spoke.

"I'm not sure which school he's working for, but he's attacked students intent on entering the Phoenix at least several times before. You weren't aware?"

"...!"

Lester was unable to speak in his shock.

From what he'd thought he'd known, Cyrus was a rather obedient subordinate.

However, that did nothing to dispel the reality of Cyrus openly sneering at him as he shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm different from you, who never employs any stratagem in battle. If there's a way to earn money without putting myself in harm's way, isn't that best?"

"Even if it means selling out your own schoolmates?"

"Schoolmates? Haha, don't make me laugh."

Cyrus laughed as he shook his head.

"Those who gather here are all enemies, no? Sure, there are times when you might work together for a team or partner battle, but aside from that, this is a dog-eat-dog world. You of the Top Twelve ought to be more than familiar with that fact, no? Life and death struggles. Victories obtained via blood, sweat, and tears. A hard-fought and harder-kept position. And for what? All that just to live your life constantly being targeted by others? I say no thanks. If I can earn the same kind of money without ever having to stick my neck out...isn't that just called using your brain?"

"...It's not like what you said is wrong. Even if we are schoolmates, it's not like we're life partners here. In order to stand at the top, you must grasp whatever opportunity arises, and spare no expense."

"Oi, Julis...!"

Giving a seemingly heartfelt response, Lester frowned.

"But- don't think for a second what you said is right, either."

"Oh my, how unexpected. I was sure you and I were of the same mind."

"Unexpected for me as well. I never would have guessed that you'd even think of mentioning me in the same sentence as you, you bastard."

Julis seemed to tire of their banter, as she began to glare at Cyrus.

Lester cut in.

"Before I beat the shit out of you, there's something I want to ask first. Why did you call me out here? Did you really think that I was going to agree with you? If that's the case, then all I can say is your stupidity is without limit."

"No, no, no. It's you who's the idiot here. You're my backup plan. In case negotiations with Julis failed, I need a scapegoat to take the fall for me."

"...You stupid piece of shit. You really think I'm going to just listen to you?"

"Oh, no worries. After I'm done here, it's not like the two of you will be able to say a word. I'll just throw a few excuses here and there, and that'll be that. For example, 'refusing to budge an inch, they fought to their very limits before both falling victim to their wounds.' Sounds good, doesn't it?"

Those words seemed to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Lester lost all semblance of reason.

"Alright then. If you really think you can silence me, go ahead and try. Let's see what you've got!"

As he spoke, Lester pulled out his Lux, Bardiche Leo, which was almost as large as he was.

"Lester, don't rush things. I'm sure he's got traps in place. For better or worse, he is a Dante," Julis said, without letting her guard down around Lester. In this situation, however, she didn't have the option of simply ignoring him.

Utterly ignoring her words, Lester leapt forward, closing the gap between Cyrus and himself in an instant. The enormous axe of light swung down with vigor.

"Die!"

Suddenly-

"Wha-?!"

A brawny black shadow dropped down between them, obstructing Lester's vicious attack.

-Barehanded.

Blocking his blow barehanded was frightening enough already, but even as Lester began to exert the full might of his physique, the other party refused to so much as budge. Lester, confident in the fact that his physical strength was preeminent at Seidokan Academy, was astonished beyond belief.

Despite his shock, he still jumped back, putting some distance between them.

"Hmph. I see, so that's your companion?"

"Companion? Haha. Honestly, please try to keep up."

Cyrus snapped his fingers. Immediately, two more black-garbed assailants joined the first.

"-Allow me to introduce my puppets. Cute, aren't they?"

The attackers proceeded to strip off their clothing.

Hidden underneath were what were undeniably puppets.

There were empty sockets where their eyes should have been, and they lacked any hint of either a nose or mouth. Most notably, their bodies were entirely smooth, and spheres took the place of joints.

Although while, strictly speaking, they were humanoid, the discrepancies proved highly disturbing.

"Combat replicants...?"

Combat replicants were indeed very practical on the battlefield, but their use required specialized equipment.

It was highly unlikely that such complicated machinery was at work here. It wasn't impossible, technically; however, to accomplish such completely in secret here in Asterisk might as well have been.

"Please don't compare that sort of crude garbage with my puppets, OK? They don't have any machinery in them whatsoever."

If that was true, then there was no way they could move.

And yet, the evidence stood before them. Not only could they move, but their movements were incredibly life-like.

"-I see. This is your true ability as a Dante, isn't it?"

The reason she'd never been able to sense their presence was finally clear: her opponents were inanimate objects. They were naturally incapable of feeling bloodlust, and so she had been unable to sense such from them.

"You tricky bastard, so you still had this up your sleeve...! Didn't you tell everyone that the extent of your ability was controlling swords...?"

"Can you seriously be this stupid? Hahahaha. Oh man, this is too funny. Anyway, try and think about this for a moment - what kind of moron freely reveals his trump card?"

Cyrus threw up his hands in an exaggerated shrug.

"Lester-san, you got it. My ability allows me to use mana to exert control over any inanimate object bearing my mark. As long as it's inanimate, even something as complex as these puppets will heed my will. Of course, no one in this school has heard this before."

Julis began to understand the reason for his boundless confidence.

"The reason you use puppets in your ambushes is because no one knows about your ability. They'd never guess it was you."

This would always give him the perfect alibi. Using this ability made things perfectly simple. As long as it fell within the operational reach of his powers, he'd never need to appear himself. If his puppets wore cameras, then he could follow the situation from afar.

If a Strega or Dante were to commit crimes with such an ability, they'd be extremely hard to catch. Accordingly, those with abilities of this type were usually required to register themselves-

"Whatever! All I have to do is kick your ass here, and hand your ass over to the disciplinary committee or Stjarnagarmr. Problem solved."

"Let's see whether or not you two make it out of here in one piece first, OK?"

"That's fine with me. Allow me to show you my true strength...!"

As Lester concentrated his Prana, the light blades of Leo Bardiche grew to double their former size. Julis had already witnessed this on many previous occasions; this was Lester's Meteor Arts.

The battle-axe was now closer in appearance to a giant war hammer.

"Take this! Burst Nemea!"^[8]

Lester howled as he struck with his full might, blowing the three puppets away.

With a horrifying boom, the puppets crashed into a pillar, shattering into splinters and cracking the affected pillar.

Of the three puppets, two were utterly destroyed. Their arms and legs were snapped clean off, their bodies twisted in a sickening posture.

The brawny puppet appeared mostly unharmed, however; its body showing only faint traces of cracks. Removing itself from the pillar, it nonchalantly faced Lester down once more.

"Cheh. Rather tenacious bastard, aren't you?" Lester muttered out of the corner of his mouth, his confidence seemingly waning.

"This is an especially sturdy type designed especially to handle you, Lester-san. Its defensive abilities are quite something. Both its physique and armament were designed to imitate you, so that it could take your place if necessary."

"In order to frame me, I assume? That would make the one with a bow a copy of Landy?"

"As you say."

"Heh, you've really thought this through. Too bad for you your effort's all going to go to waste!"

Lester again swung Bardiche Leo.

Just as its blade was about to cut into the puppet before him-

"!?"

Two more puppets appeared from behind the pillar, firing at Lester in a torrent of small arms fire.

"Urgh-!"

"Lester!"

Julis, unable to restrain herself any longer, attempted to dash to his side, only to be obstructed by yet another newly-appearing puppet.

"...!"

Three more puppets still surrounded Julis. They were slightly different from the others in that they were dressed entirely in black.

All wielded a sword-type Lux.

Julis didn't dare do differently, activating her rapier-type Lux "Aspera Spina".^[9]

"Hmph...I should have guessed. You always rely on this kind of contemptible tactic, after all...!"

Lester, kneeling on a single knee in seemingly great pain, glared at Cyrus.

"Wow, still so lively."

He appeared to have focused all his Prana on defense at the moment of ambush. Although he was bleeding heavily, his will to fight didn't seem to have decreased one bit.

That said, it wasn't like Prana was limitless.

Once his Prana was exhausted, he would fade into unconsciousness. In this situation, however, it wasn't just his consciousness that might fade, but the flames of his life.

"I-it doesn't matter how many puppets you bring out, they're nothing to me..."

"Honestly, Lester-san. You really just don't get it, do you?"

In the next instant, more puppets dropped down before Lester's eyes.

One after another they came, jumping down from the ceiling two or three at a time.

Lester watched the scene unfolding before his eyes first with malice, then with shock, and finally with terror.

Julis, originally planning to break through the puppets encircling her, was left similarly frozen speechless.

In front of their very eyes stood not just ten or twenty puppets. No, the number was closer to-

"It 'doesn't matter how many puppets I bring out'? Alright then, I'm game. The maximum number of puppets I can control at any given time is one hundred and twenty-eight."

"One hundred..."



Lester revealed an expression fraught with deep despair.

Cyrus looked down at him with glee and cleared his throat.

"Oh...the expressions on your faces! This is it, this is what I wanted to see! Alright, I am going to savor this."

Cyrus waved a hand. All the puppets simultaneously charged Lester.

"Stop this, Cyrus!"

Julis tried to forcibly break through her surrounding puppets, but their numbers were too vast by far.

While individually they were nothing special, their coordination was remarkable.

From behind Cyrus' giggling visage, Julis could hear the occasional miserable scream, but soon enough, even those ceased.

"Hey, no need to rush, alright? Feel free to struggle all you want. I need to make it look you were the one who took Lester-san out, so I need to prepare the scene just right."

"Bloom - Snapping Firebloom of the Engulfing Dragon(Antirrhinum Majus)!"^[10]

Things having reached this point, Julis' personality wasn't so laid-back as to simply allow Cyrus to continue talking. Tracing the orbit that Julis weaved with her Lux, magic circles began to appear from which an intense heat burst forth. Immediately following was an enormous dragon of flame which appeared as if bursting forth from a magic circle.

"Ooh, that's a new one on me."

Cyrus mumbled his admiration. This was natural, as this technique was one of Julis' trump cards. There's no way she'd casually allows others to witness it.

The roar of the flame dragon shook the very air. Immediately following, it crushed the puppets encircling Julis in its jaws.

"Uwa?!"

Although the puppets were all flame-retardant in preparation for the battle with Julis, that didn't provide the least protection against the overwhelming force with which they were being crushed.

"Amazing. It looks like that fifth rank isn't just for show..."

Cyrus opened some distance between them and snapped his fingers once more.

"But, in the end, quantity over quality!"

Five puppets bored through the dragon's lower jaw, encircling and attacking Julis once more.

"Tch-!"

Julis raised her Lux to meet them head-on. However, since the majority of her attention was focused on controlling the dragon, her reactions were slower than normal.

She barely blocked an attack that nearly cleaved her in half. The tip of her Lux began to erupt with a blinding light.

"Don't look down on me!"

Julis kicked the chest of the puppet before her with force, dodged the weapon of the puppet who had snuck behind her, and thrust clear through it with her Lux.

-Unfortunately.

The puppet wasn't in the least affected as it grabbed ahold of Julis.

"Wha- A kamikaze attack?!"

"Hehehe. Rather effective isn't it?"

As he spoke, the row of puppets by Cyrus' side took aim.

"!"

Julis called her dragon to her to ward off her attack, but she was a second too late.

"Guah!?"

Streaks of light flew at her and pierced her thigh.

Unable to stand, Julis fell to her knees. Two puppets grabbed her by her arms and pinned her to the wall.

At the same moment, her flame dragon faded into nothingness.

"Your ability really is quite powerful, but it sure has a problematic weakness. It's limited to what you can see with your eyes."

"...You really are some stalker..."

Julis struggling with the pain, taunted him with a smile.

"But you know, I've figured out something myself."

"And what is that?"

"Allekant's the one pulling your strings."

Cyrus' smile vanished.

"You just mentioned it, didn't you? That these puppets were 'specially designed'. These designs, specifically intended to counter Lester and I - how did you come by them? To say nothing of the sheer number. Simply put, there's no way they could have come from any other school."

"You really are too smart for your own good. Oh well, all you've done is reaffirmed that I really can't let you go."

"Bullcrap. Like you ever planned to let me go."

Cyrus approached Julis, and stomped on her thigh wound with great animosity.

"Guwaah-!"

"Hehe, don't worry; the pain will end soon. Originally, I'd planned to torment you a bit more, but it seems I'd best get this over with."

Cyrus turned his back on Julis, groaning in pain, and raised his hand.

She saw the brawny puppet approach her, gigantic axe in hand, ready to hack her open.

"..."

She couldn't bear to watch any further, and closed her eyes.

-At that moment, a gust of wind blew past her.

A wind both gentle and carefree, and yet with all the ferocity of a gale-force wind.

"Sorry I'm late."

Shocked, Julis opened her eyes. In front of her stood a young man who had no place being here.

In his right hand he gripped a large sword of blinding white light.

"Ayato?!"

As Julis screamed his name, the axe-wielding puppet crumpled.

At precisely the same moment, the puppets holding her did the same, their bodies sliding apart where they had been severed in half.

"W-what are you doing here...?"

Ayato held her in his arms.

As relief flooded through her, a complicated mix of joy and embarrassment bubbled up in her heart.

"Thanks to Saya and Claudia."

"Sasamiya and Claudia...?"

No, that's not what was important here.

"Don't tell me you came here to save me?"

"...Isn't that what just happened?"

Julis couldn't help but be enraged by his words.

Didn't he know for whose sake it was she had braved her loneliness to make her way here?

...She had to be honest with herself. This bright, kind-hearted young man was someone incredibly dear to her. And yet it was for that very reason that she hadn't wanted him to get caught up in this.

"This is my problem, it's none of your business! Why would you intentionally put yourself in harm's way?!"

Speaking the words that floated up from deep within him, Ayato responded openly.

"Julis, you said before that you were fighting of your own accord, for your own sake? That protecting that orphanage was something you yourself desired to do?"

"...That's right."

Julis was slightly taken aback by the sudden change in topic, but she nodded.

"I honestly find that admirable. It's just that-"

Pausing his words for a moment, Ayato turned to look Julis in the eyes before continuing.

"-Who's going to protect you?"

"Protect, me...?"

Julis had never before considered this question.

All that she was had been for the sake of protecting that which was dear to her.

Every spare moment had been spent toward achieving this very goal.

To take the reins of the future, to ensure that tragedy never repeated itself, she'd devoted her very being.

And that was why-

"Did you know, Julis? I've always been searching. Always seeking. In pursuit of that which only I can do, that which I want to do, that which I must do - my life's purpose. Ever since the person precious to me above all else disappeared, I've never stopped looking. It wasn't until I came here - until I met you - that I've finally found what I've been chasing after."

Ayato's voice was filled with deep longing, as if bidding a dear friend farewell.

"Now I know what I want to do - and I have the power to make it happen. This, is my calling-"

"Your...calling?"

"I will be your strength. Just that."

Ayato nodded lightly as a smile lit his face.

The eyes that met Julis' were open and sincere.

Fathomless and dark, eyes like the boundless night sky.

She felt her heart begin to pound.

Although slightly painful, it was a mysterious feeling which filled her with joy.

This was something she'd never experienced before, an emotion which surged with great force-

"Are you two done? Man, I never would have guessed you'd show up here - Amagiri Ayato-kun."

The voice pulled Julis back to her senses. She saw Cyrus give an exaggerated shrug.

He was as unperturbed as ever. Even if three of his puppets had been destroyed in an instant, he wasn't unnerved in the slightest.

Brimming with confidence, even if Ayato had now joined the game, he was sure the victor had remained unchanged.

"So that was the power of Ser-Vesta. It truly is something to behold."

Ser-Vesta was a name that even Julis had heard of before. It was a prized possession of Seidokan Academy, a first-rate Ogre Lux which hid a terrifying ability. Truly a demon sword indeed.

Its enormous blade radiated with a blinding white light, held aloft by a single of Ayato's hands.

"Unfortunately, such a weapon is wasted on a second-rate owner like yourself. Ayato, I've already watched you fight. People with your mediocre level of ability are a dime a dozen. Your success just now was only because you took me by surprise. Faced with my army of over a hundred puppets, what can you possibly hope to achieve-"

"-Shut your mouth. The despicable coward who attacks others by surprise is you, Cyrus Norman."

It was almost impossible to believe such a cold and unfeeling reply had come from Ayato.

Intimidated, Cyrus retreated a step.

As he realized what he'd unconsciously done, his face twisted with rage.

"...You sure talk big, but why don't we see if you can back that up?"

Cyrus again snapped his fingers, and once more, the ranks of his puppet army readied their weapons.

"If you have what it takes to face off against an entire army, then bring it!"

Bullets of light flew from all directions as puppets wielding Lux swords, axes, and guns attacked all at once.

However.

"-Secret sword bound by the prison of stars, release your might!"

At that precise moment, Julis saw.

Ayato's face showed a bitter expression. At first, she'd figured he was simply raising his Prana to its limits. Instead, she saw magic circles floating all around him, which sparkled into nothingness. A breathtaking surge of Prana was released, becoming a pillar of light that touched the heavens.



Almost as if the chains that bound him had been undone.

A moment later, he disappeared.

"Wha...?"

Cyrus mouthed wordlessly as he watched the puppets that had attacked Ayato fall apart. Looking at the fallen bodies, it wasn't so much that they'd been cleaved in half by a blade as that they'd been burned clear through by tremendous heat.

Cyrus stood unmoving, completely at a loss to explain what was occurring before his very eyes, as he continued to stare at the location Ayato had previously occupied.

"...How! How is this possible!?"

Finally coming to his senses, Cyrus surveyed the situation.

"W-where did you disappear to now-!?"

"I'm right here."

"!"

Ayato stood behind him.

Grasping Julis tightly with his arm, he'd appeared behind Cyrus in an instant. His path was made evident by the trail of bodies.

Julis watched the scenery before her change like channels on a television as she realized just what kind of inconceivable speed she was being made witness to.

"Y-y-you...!"

Ashen-faced, Cyrus turned and staggered backward.

Before him stood a young man, a giant sword in his right hand, Julis in his left. His entire body overflowed with a force of Prana so dense it was nearly visible.

"W-what are you...?"

Julis was similarly stunned speechless, but recovering her senses, she started to struggle.

"A-actually, let me go! I don't want to be a burden on you!"

It didn't matter how light she was, holding a person in your arms as you fought was bound to negatively affect your combat ability.

This was even more true since it forced Ayato to wield Ser-Vesta single-handed. The burden created by doing so couldn't be underestimated.

"No. If I were to put you down, he'd undoubtedly go after you. I'm sorry, but please bear with it for a moment longer."

"But then you can't use your other arm...!"

"There's no need to worry. You wouldn't believe how light this sword is."

Ayato waved Ser-Vesta lightly. Along the blade, clear as snow, a trace of black began to show. Rather, it should be said that the trace of black actually left the blade, coiling around its body.

The thought that naturally came to Julis' mind was of the blackened flames of hell, leaking through their seal. Perhaps that was the origin of this weapon's name.

"Although, even if I say that, I really can't maintain this for too long. Not that it matters when it comes to opponents of this level, though."

Ayato again advanced toward Cyrus.

"Uu...! It seems like you've got some skills, but don't underestimate me!"

Cyrus tried to give the appearance of having maintained his calm, but it was obvious he was deeply worried.

"Let me show you what I'm really capable of...!"

The ranks of puppets which had fallen into disarray, again organized themselves into an orderly formation.

The first ranks held those which were armed with spears, axes, and other long-range melee weapons. The middle ranks were composed of those puppets with swords, and the final ranks were armed with guns and bows. Cyrus stood at the rear, directing his forces.

"This is the true form of my Merciless Puppet Army(Merciless Corps)! Its destructive power is equal to that of a military company; if you want to challenge it, go right ahead!"

The first ranks suddenly charged forward.

Ayato dodged the tip of a spear which came lancing towards him, but arrows had already targeted his reaction. Ayato blocked them with Ser-Vesta, at which point the sword-wielding puppets attacked.

"Uwah!"

Ayato again avoided an attack before leaping backwards.

Julis finally took a breath.

The succession of attacks had only missed her by a hair. Ayato wasn't clutching her with his full strength, but nonetheless, their intimate proximity had Julis blushing.

Julis scolded herself for allowing her imagination to run wild at a time like this, but it couldn't be helped.

"To think you would actually avoid all that...That said, it's all you can do just to dodge, isn't it?"

Watching Ayato defend himself, Cyrus began to recover some of his former confidence, as he bared a mocking grin.

"Ah, about that. After that attack just now, I understand everything."

"...And what is it that has you so enlightened?"

"Six types, right? That's the most you can move at once."

"Wha-"

Cyrus frowned in disbelief.

"And here I thought you were going to say something profound. Are you blind? Am I not moving more than one hundred puppets right before your very eyes?"

"It's precisely because I'm not blind; all you have to do is look. Only six types are capable of independent movement. Those capable of following some basic patterns are around 16 at most, and the remaining are only capable of pulling triggers and waving their wrists; that kind of simple motion."

"...!"

"That's only good enough for a bluff. Now I see why you always have to rely on sneak attacks. Were you to try and use this sort of crude ability in a real match, you'd be seen through."

Cyrus, paling, began to tremble.

His reaction was enough to verify that Ayato's words had been spot-on.

"You know, speaking of six types and sixteen puppets...your ability uses the imagery of chess, doesn't it?"

"Chess, that's it!"

Generally speaking, the abilities of the Strega and Dante were modeled after real objects. Just as Julis' abilities used flowers as a focus, it seems Cyrus' abilities mimicked chess pieces.

As Julis nodded, she was simultaneously filled with admiration for Ayato's impeccable powers of observation.

If that short engagement had been enough for his secret to be seen through, then it was clear that Ayato was many levels above Cyrus.

"You probably saw yourself as a grandmaster - but that's not how this game is played."

"You...bastard...!"

Flushed completely red, Cyrus howled in rage.

The front ranks of puppets again charged forward, but this time Ayato didn't dodge. Instead, Ayato strided toward the dense mass of the puppet army, and swung his sword.

As the light flashed, three lance-wielding puppets fell to pieces. Ayato swung his sword with extraordinary speed, and with all the ease of brushing away an insect, each puppet that appeared instantly dropped.

"It's useless. Even putting aside the fact that they're powerless alone, as long as you've grasped their movements, they may as well be made of wood."

Ayato swung his blade without so much as looking. Like a moth to a flame, the puppets approached him, and with a searing hiss, were dispatched.

In other words, Ayato had completely grasped their movements.

"Alright then, it's about time we finish up."

As he finished speaking, he suddenly charged into the mass of the puppet army's main body.

With every swing of his sword, the number of puppets dropped.

Several of the puppets attempted to guard against his attacks, but to no avail. Ser-Vesta was simply too strong. As other Lux weapons attempted to meet it, both the puppets and the weapons they had used as shields were cut through like a hot knife through butter.

Julis trembled at the sight of this almighty power.

(A demonic sword that can't be blocked...?)

Even for an Ogre-Lux, this was just too much.

They then tried to evade his attacks, but his sword was far too fast.

-It hadn't even been three minutes.

During this short duration, Cyrus' puppet army which had numbered over a hundred was now left utterly in ruins.

Whether it was the large and sturdy type meant for Lester or the black-clothed flame-retardant type meant for her; all lay in pieces.

"...This isn't possible...This isn't possible...Impossible...Just not possible..."

Watching the scene before him in disbelief, Cyrus seemed to have fallen into an incoherent stupor. As Ayato pointed his sword at him, he let out a scream and fell on his butt.

"Game's over, Cyrus."

"...It's not over yet! I still have my trump card!"

From his position on the floor, Cyrus waved his arms energetically.

From behind a pile of rubble an enormous puppet appeared.

It was five times the size of any previous one. If it hadn't been for the hole in the roof, it would undoubtedly have smashed through the ceiling. Its limbs were large enough to rival the size of the pillars of the decrepit building. Although it was still vaguely humanoid, it resembled an ape much more than a human.

"Ahahahaha! Come forth - my queen! Destroy my enemies!"

Heeding the command, the queen charged Ayato at a speed unfitting for its large size.

She didn't seem to be armed, but all things considered, she probably didn't need to be. With all the momentum that blow could accumulate given its mass, even someone from the Starpulse Generation would be unable to withstand its force.

Ayato, however, only sighed, and again took Ser-Vesta up in a stance.

At the precise moment when that giant fist would splatter the two, the sword flashed.

"Rend flesh and shatter bone - Amagiri Bright Dragon Style, Intermediate Technique <Nine-fanged Longsword>!"

Even Julis, watching from point-blank, couldn't tell what Ayato had done.

She saw but a single flash from Ser-Vesta, but in the next moment, all four of the giant puppet's limbs had been severed, dropping to the ground with a loud rumble. A huge scar had been scored into the puppet's body. She wasn't sure just what kind of attack could leave such a mark - actually, she wasn't even sure just how many times Ayato had attacked in that single moment.

"_"

At last, Cyrus was left completely speechless.

As Ayato approached, his face twisted in fear and he ran.

"Aaaaaaaaaah!"

Stumbling, crawling, wailing, he squeezed his way into the wreckage of his puppets.

"You really don't give up, do you?"

Ayato frowned impatiently, and followed after with a dangerous expression.

Even if Ayato had immediately taken after him, he was still a step behind.

Clutching a piece of wreckage to his chest, Cyrus began to float.

More accurately, it was the wrecked piece of his puppet that began to float, but the effect was the same either way.

He watched Cyrus accelerate and speed away.

"Sorry, Julis. I need to go after him. Would you mind waiting for me here?"

"If you're going to ask, then of course I can. Can you catch him though?"

"...I'll be honest; it's going to be hard."

At that moment, Cyrus had nearly reached the roof. If he managed to escape the building...

"Alright then. Tag me in."

"Huh...?"

"Didn't I say this already? I refuse to be a burden!"

Julis laughed fearlessly and gathered her Prana.

"Bloom proudly - Stellar Wings of the Bird of Paradise(Strelitzia)!"

As mana gathered, wings of pure flame began to sprout from Ayato's back.

"Uwa!"

"We're going to take off. Leave control to me! I'm going to teach that despicable piece of trash a very painful lesson!"

"...Princesses shouldn't talk like that."

Julis ignored Ayato's comment and spread her wings.

The pair flew through the hole in the roof and out of the building in a burst of speed, emerging into a sunset scarlet-dyed sky.

Although this was Julis' first time flying with the weight of two people, she felt anything but unsteady. Indeed, strength bubbled forth from somewhere deep within her.

Julis again accelerated, and they soon caught up to Cyrus.

"-This is checkmate, Cyrus Norman."

"S-stop! Noooooooooooooo-!"

They flashed by him.

The remaining piece of his puppet turned to ash and Cyrus loosed a blood-curdling scream as he fell into the depths of the dilapidated building.

Seeing as he was a member of the Starpulse Generation, the fall posed no threat to his life.

"Claudia and the others ought to be waiting below. Let's leave this to them."

"I understand..."

Julis closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

A lot had happened, but it'd finally drawn to an end.

The strong breeze flowing by felt decidedly comfortable.

"How beautiful..."

At Ayato's words, Julis opened her eyes and surveyed the scene.

"...You're right, it's gorgeous."

The gradually setting sun dyed the city a deep rose.

The streets, sky, and lake surface, all a captivating scarlet.

Julis and Ayato spread their wings and, turning to one another, laughed.

"-Guh!"

Suddenly, Ayato's expression twisted in pain.

"W-what's wrong?" Julis prompted.

Even before receiving an answer, she could tell something was off.

All the mana in their surroundings began to accumulate with Ayato at its center.

This amount was no joke.

"W-what is this...?"

She couldn't feel the presence of any Strega or Dante in the vicinity.

It was likely this was the effect of some mechanism put in place beforehand. To be honest, such abilities weren't all that rare. Both time-delay abilities as well as those that took effect after some pre-existing condition was met were rather common.

(But this much mana...just what on earth...?)

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

As Ayato let out a painful shout, magic circles began to appear all around Ayato. From these magic circles, shackles of light erupted, and bound him hand and foot.

"This is from earlier-!?"

These magic circles were identical to those she had seen earlier when his Prana had surged to untold limits.

(In other words, those magic circles are meant to bind his powers? It takes this much mana just to do that...!?)

"Uuuuh..."

"Hey, hey! Ayato! Hey!"

Ayato seemed to lose consciousness, and his body fell slack.

Thankfully, the wings of flame were under Julis' control, or things could have taken a turn for the worse. Until just a moment ago, it had been Ayato who'd held Julis in his arms. Now, their positions had switched, and she held onto him for dear life.

"Honestly! What a pain."

Julis searched for a convenient spot to land, spreading her wings once more.

"...Forgive me, Ayato."

The maiden's face showed a smile, but her eyes brimmed with tears. She gently placed her hands atop the boy's head.

"Onee-chan...?"

Attired in an old dojo uniform, the boy gazed up at the girl, puzzled.

Moonlight shone through the dojo windows, announcing the room empty for all but the two. The room was near silent but for the sounds of wildlife, and the dark mood of night filled the empty dojo.

On this night, the girl was clearly unsettled.

Her attitude and voice, at once warm and gentle, steady and stern, was as per usual. However, the eyes through which she gazed at the boy were clearly not.

The boy's face proclaimed his confusion. As he opened his mouth to speak, to inquire, the girl closed her eyes as if to cut him off.

"...Forgive me."

While the girl continued to plead for forgiveness, over and over, the world began to spin furiously, engulfing the boy.

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!"

The boy screamed wildly.

An intense pain ran through his body, like an electric shock. The boy tried to struggle, but was unable to so much as lift a finger. From out of the thin air, countless shackles appeared and clung to him, binding his entire body. The boy endeavored to look up and over, beyond the hand of the girl, blocking his vision, as countless magic circles appeared.

The boy couldn't comprehend what was happening.

More correctly, the boy understood in his mind; this was his sister's power. This was the power to stem the flow of nature itself, a defensive power with the strength to forcibly suppress all things. A power that belonged only to one who possessed a magician's nature - a Strega.

However, the girl normally despised her power. For her to use this power on the boy was inconceivable.

Or so the boy believed.

"O-Onee-chan...why...?"

The boy whispered in a quiet voice that was fast fading. Strength drained out of his body with each passing moment.

The girl continued to hold her eyes shut, as she mumbled solemnly.

"-By the power of the circular shackles, your might shall be imprisoned."

At that moment, the boy's senses vanished as certainly as if they'd fled into the night sky.

As if he'd been thrown into a bottomless pit, the entire world seemed to flood with darkness.

His consciousness fading, his mind hazy, he faintly heard the voice of the girl, struggling to keep herself together as she answered.

"Didn't I say before? I will protect you, and so-"

As the voice seemed to fade into the distance, the boy fought with all his might to reach out his hand.

"N-no...! I also want to protect Onee-chan...!"

It was for this purpose, it was all for this one purpose, that the boy had worked so tirelessly.

And yet-

"Good-bye, Ayato. I love you."

In all of the boy's memories, that was the last time he ever heard his sister speak.

As Ayato opened his eyes, what entered his vision was the sight of Julis, her frown fraught with concern.

Seeing him come to, however, she brightened considerably.

"Hey, finally awake? For a moment there, I really didn't know what to do."

"Hmm, this is...Ow!"

Still not clear on the situation, Ayato tried to rise, but pain wracked his body.

This searing pain, however, allowed him to remember.

"Ah. I fainted."

"Don't push yourself. We're currently on the roof of that rundown building. I've already spoken to Claudia, she's going to come get us."

"That's great. Thanks."

In Ayato's current condition, even walking would likely prove to be difficult.

Ayato looked around. The sun had long since set, night had fallen, and stars filled the sky.

"T-there's no need to thank me. Rather, it should be the reverse. I owe you my life."

Speaking, Julis turned aside.

Seeing Julis as straightforward as always, Ayato inwardly rejoiced.

Suddenly, feeling that something was off, Ayato squinted his eyes as he looked at Julis.

Things were far too soft for him to be lying on the ground, as he'd supposed.

Moreover, he caught the slightest scent of a flowery fragrance.

"H-hey, stop that! Don't just move around...!"

Moreover, as he suddenly realized, her face was rather close.

-In other words, he was currently resting on her lap.

"Wah! S-sorry! I'll get up...argh!"

Flustered, he tried to rise, only to feel an electric shock run through his body.

"D, don't worry about it. Calm down, you idiot! You still can't stand, right?"

"B, but-"

"I-I said not to worry, so don't worry! Geez."

Julis, whose face was now so red it seemed steam would come out, turned her head and swatted Ayato on the forehead.

"Alright, fine..."

It seems it was best to avoid rocking the boat.

Ayato, now also blushing to his ears, moved only enough to nod lightly.

"T-that reminds me."

Julis coughed lightly, and looked at Ayato.

"Mind explaining what just happened?"

"Oh...well, what is it you want me to explain?"

"Let's start with whatever it is that's suppressing your powers. That's the work of a Strega or Dante, correct? Who's the one who did that to you?"

"Ha, that, huh..."

Ayato hesitated for a moment, but seeing Julis lean in close, he decided to stop playing dumb, sighed, and began to answer.

"...My sister. My sister's power allows her to bind all creation."

Julis appeared ill at ease with his answer.

"Is that so...in other words, that just now was your true power?"

"You could say that, although that's not entirely correct."

"Which is it? Such a frustrating man."

Ayato smiled wryly, and then answered the fuming Julis.

"A power you can't control doesn't count as part of your 'true power'."

"From what I saw, you didn't seem to have any problems."

"Within the bounds of a certain time limit, yes. That was my first time going over five minutes. When the time limit's up, I pay the price, and am left unable to move an inch. It's not like it's all bad, but it's not something to write home about either."

The first time he'd tried to break his bonds, he hadn't even lasted ten seconds.

"...Why would your sister do something like that to you?"

"If I had a chance to ask her, I would like to know as well. Five years ago, after she did this to me, she disappeared."

"But-

"It's alright. I'm sure she had her reasons."

Ayato waved away Julis' concerns.

"Speaking of which, there's something I'd like to ask you myself."

"Go ahead."

"Have you found a partner for the Phoenix yet?"

"Ah...!"

Julis open frown answered his question for him.

Ayato, relieved, continued to speak.

"In that case, um...how about me?"

"What?"

"I wouldn't call myself a saint, but I think I do alright. My mind's about as sharp as the average person. When it comes to an iron will or noble spirit, well...I might have to ask you to turn a blind eye there..."

"...You know you just admitted you don't meet any of the requirements."

Although Julis was thoroughly taken aback, she put on a tactful smile.

"I am grateful that you're thinking about me, but don't push yourself. When it comes to the Festa, your normal abilities aren't enough. Moreover, didn't you say you weren't interested in fighting?"

"Don't worry about any of that," Ayato stated firmly.

"I said this before, right? My calling right now - it's to be your strength, Julis."

His words made Julis blush.

"B-but, you shouldn't decide this sort of thing so casually..."

"...Are you sure you're not just embarrassed? Your face is pretty red."

"I-idiot! Who did you say was embarrassed?! And you, stop looking!"

Julis gave Ayato a slap.

It didn't hurt, but she held on to Ayato's face, obstructing his vision.

"..."

"...Julis?"

She didn't reply.

In place of words, Ayato felt the hand on his face shake a little.

"-D, do you really mean that?"

Her voice was barely louder than a whisper, and it quivered as she spoke.

Utterly unlike the self-confident tone she normally used, this insecure voice spoke of her fear of disappointment. Her voice revealed her fear of extending her hand to another, or of reaching out to take another's hand which had been extended to her.

Such a reaction was very common. No matter who it was, taking a new step entirely on faith was something that brought fear and anxiety; that was common sense.

And perhaps - this was Julis' true nature.

Neither more nor less than that of a normal girl.

If such a girl were to bravely and staunchly advance for the sake of acting on her convictions, she would be both amazingly courageous and overwhelmingly adorable.

"Do you even need to ask?"

And so, answering, his resolve was no less than her own.

He would not allow himself to feel regret; no, never again.

This time, he wouldn't make the same mistake.

"...Honestly. You are one strange guy."

Julis released her grip.

Under the starry sky, Julis smiled.

Ayato spoke not a word. He simply raised his hand and gently wiped away the tears that had run down her face.

Epilogue

Cyrus Norman dragged his limp body onward, desperately fleeing into a small alley in the redevelopment zone.

He'd carefully aimed his fall at what he'd deemed the largest pile of wrecked dolls. Acting as a cushion, it offset some of the impact from his fall, but it was too much to expect that he'd avoid injury nonetheless. He wasn't sure just how many bones in his body had been broken, but a horrifying pain ran throughout his body, and he felt as if he had been rent apart.

But he didn't stop.

Since the Integrated Enterprise Foundation's secret forces - the Shadow Stars - had already been mobilized, there was no way he could afford to be caught here. Without a doubt, they'd go to any length to get answers out of him, and then...

"Shit! Why?! Why aren't you picking up...?!"

This was clearly the moment when he most needed Allekant's support, and yet his designated contact line wasn't working.

"If I'm going down, don't think I'm going down alone...!"

"You really do place a lot of value on yourself, Norman-kun."

"!?"

Emerging from the darkness to block Cyrus' path of escape was a golden-haired young woman.

"T-the student council president...!"

In her hands she held the strangest-looking swords he'd ever seen. The pattern on their bodies looked rather like eyeballs, and the pair of swords gave the distinct impression that you had caught the eye of a monster.

Ogre Lux "Pan-Dora". This was the first Cyrus had ever seen of those notorious blades, but he'd previously heard of their ability.

"You know, the way they see it, you're just there to be used and then discarded. It's rather pitiful, really."

"...L-let's make a trade."

"A trade? With me?"

"Everything! I'll tell you everything I know! In return, I want your guarantee of my safety! Don't hand me over to the Shadow Stars but the disciplinary committee!"

Claudia tilted her head, and asked one question.

"So what's in it for me?"

Hearing her response, Cyrus snickered inwardly.

If given the slightest leeway in their negotiations, he still had a chance to turn things around.

"The Shadow Stars will undoubtedly dispose of me in some secret location. On the other hand, if the disciplinary committee gets a hold of me, this incident will spread far and wide. Until that time, you can feel free to use me as a bargaining chip for negotiation. How's that sound...?"

Claudia closed her eyes, seemingly deep in thought.

Seeing what looked to be an opening, Cyrus pressed his silver tongue onward.

"We're the same kind of person, you and I - treating others like pieces on a chessboard. Morons wouldn't understand, but using your chips where they're most warranted is how a master wins this game. I think you understand as well, right?"

"I see...that certainly does make sense."

At this sentence, Cyrus relaxed immensely.

This woman definitely placed the priority on things that had value - a rational, but easily-seen-through personality.

Suddenly, however, Claudia gave an elegant laugh.

"It's just that...there's one area where we're different, Norman-kun."

"...?"

"You think of yourself as the one moving the pieces, but I see myself as just another piece on the board. If that wasn't the case, wouldn't things be just too boring?"

She began to chuckle delightedly.

"Moreover - as opposed to having this incident spread all over - I'd much rather take care of it in quiet, and hold it over Allekant's head. I think that's a lot more useful, don't you think?"

Cyrus' face lost its color, and he began to tremble.

"Uaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With a terrible shout, Cyrus played his last card.

From within his clothes, a hidden knife burst out, under the control of his abilities; a sneak attack aimed directly at Claudia. From this distance, this was a sure-kill; of this, Cyrus was certain.

-However.

"Honestly. I thought you already knew what these kids' ability was?"

Claudia had foreseen his sneak attack, and swatted his knife out of the air.

The sneak attack was a complete and utter failure.

As the knife landed, it came to rest precisely in the heel of Cyrus, who had turned to flee.

"Aah...!"

"Hey, there's no need to be so scared; you're still of use to me. For now, anyway."

Claudia showed her usual smile.

But her eyes were cold as ice. Cyrus was frozen to the spot like prey caught in the glare of a predator.

"Right then. I bid you farewell."

Speaking in a gentle tone, Claudia waved her twin blades as if dancing. From the eyeballs on the hilt of her swords erupted an eery ray of light. Cyrus suddenly fountained blood from all over.

"...T-that's 'Pan-Dora'..."

He fell to his knees and then slumped onto the ground.

Among those Ogre Lux weapons most prized at Seidokan, this demonic weapon boasted the power to see the future.

The school badge on Cyrus' chest had been destroyed. As he faded into unconsciousness, he felt someone approach.

"Oh, come on. Don't tell me you did this again."

From out of the shadows of the streetlights, an indiscreet young man appeared, greeting Claudia in a casual tone.

"Don't worry about it. Just toss him in the punishment room. I leave the cleanup to you Shadow Stars; covering things up is your specialty after all."

"Of course. That's how we put food on the table, after all."

The young man cast a quick glance at Cyrus, shrugging as if it didn't concern him.

Almost as if he was an outsider.

"Oh, that reminds me. How did things end up with those two?"

"Julis just contacted me. It seems everything went well."

"If that's the case, why is it that you really look don't seem all that happy right now?"

"Ho~...to be seen through by you, I really need to step it up."

"If it bothers you that much, shouldn't you have just gone with him?" the young man said noncommittally.

"It wasn't an option. I have my own responsibilities, after all."

"Is that really all there is to it?"

The young man chuckled, teasing Claudia. She laughed as before, before countering him sharply.

"Could it be that you were ordered from on high to investigate me, Yabuki Eishirou-kun?"

"No, no, no, of course not!"

The young man vigorously shook his head, but he never stopped chuckling.

"That was purely out of curiosity. I was just wondering if you were really fine leaving everything up to them."

Crestfallen, Claudia hung her head dejectedly in response, and sighing, said, "...It can't be helped. It's regretful, but, just this once, I'll let Julis have this one. Either way, this show is just getting started."

In the dark corners of a lab somewhere, a young girl heard the news. Momentarily pausing in her work, she sighed.

"Guess it's time to cut our losses. Well, in the end, we did gather all the data we wanted, and he even accomplished his goal - he really took to ambushing those strong students rather earnestly."

At her side, innumerable windows opened mid-air, displaying rapidly changing numbers and graphs.

"But more importantly~ Doesn't that mean that the puppets I designed are super strong? Hehehe."

The girl laughed in delight, as she manipulated her optical keyboard.

"...As expected, those who think they're smarter than they actually are really are the easiest to deal with."

The corners of her lip were upturned in a confident, self-assured smile. The girl returned to her work.

-From out of the corner of her eye, two puppets were silently resting.

ー あ と が き ー

どうも初めまして。

「学戦都市アスタリスク」のイラストを
担当しましたokiuraです。

まず最初にこの作品を読ませて頂いた時

三屋咲先生の見事な描写力に
グイグイと惹き込まれました。

この本をお手に取った方にも
その気持ちが共有できれば

嬉しく思います。

そして、その魅力を

自分の絵で少しでも底上げ
出来ればという

想いを込めて描きました。

これから綾斗君を

はじめ

ヒロイン達

各学園の活躍を
楽しみにしていて
下さい。



「学戦都市アスタリスク」用語解説

落星雨(インペルティア)

二十世紀に地球を襲った未曾有の大災害。三日三晩に渡って世界中に隕石が降り注ぎ、多くの都市が壊滅した。この結果、既存国家の力は著しく低下し、統合企業財体と呼ばれる新たな経済主体が取って代わることになる。

またこの隕石群からは未知の元素である万応素が検出され、科学技術の発展を促すと共に《星脈世代》と呼ばれる特異な力を持った新人類を生み出した。

《落星雨》はいずれの観測機関もその予兆を捕らえることがなく、また通常の隕石と比べて破壊規模が小さすぎることから、ただの隕石ではないのではという説が主流。

統合企業財体(Integrated Enterprise Foundation)

《落星雨》後、混乱の極みにあった世界経済を乗り越えるために無数の企業が融合して誕生した新しい経済主体。疲弊した国家を遥かに凌ぐ力を持つ。

かつては八つ、現在では「銀河」「EP(エリオット=バウンド)」「界龍」「ソルネージュ」「フラウエンロープ」「W&W(ウォーレン・アンド・ウォーレン)」という六つの統合企業財体が存在し、互いに凌ぎ合いかながら実質的に世界をコントロールしている。アスタリスクにおいては各学園の運営母体でもある。

星武祭(フェスタ)

統合企業財体が主催し、アスタリスクで行われている学生同士の武闘大会。三年を一区切りとし、初年の夏に行われるタッグ戦は《鳳凰星武祭(フェニクス)》、二年目の秋に行われるチーム戦は《獅鷲星武祭(グリップス)》、三年目の冬に行われる個人戦は《王竜星武祭(リンドブルス)》と呼ばれている。ルールは星武憲章に定められた通り、校章の破壊によって勝敗を決する。エンターテインメントであるため、明らかな残虐行為や殺傷を目的とした攻撃は処罰の対象となる。

世界中にライブ放送され、世界最大の興行規模を誇る。統合企業財体の元では経済的な成功/発展が最重要視されるため、《星武祭》は常に多数派の消費者が望む方向へ運用してきた(参加者が学生に限定されているのも、それが多数派の意見だからである。見目良い少年少女が闘う姿を視聴者は望んでいる)。倫理的な面からの批判も存在するが、統合企業財体の元ではそういった意識は希薄化しているため、一定以上の力を持つことはない。

また各学園の校風が極端な理由も、演出によるものである。

星武憲章(ステラ・カルタ)

アスタリスクの全ての学生に適応される厳格なルール。これに違反した者は厳罰に処され、場合によっては退学もあらえる。またその関与が認められた場合、その学生が所属する学園にも罰が及ぶこともある。過去に何回か改訂を重ねている。重要な項目は以下。

一つ、アスタリスクにおける学生同士の闘争は、互いの校章を破壊することを目的とする場合のみこれを許可する。

一つ、アスタリスクにおける学生が《星武祭》へ参加できる期間は、十三歳から二十二歳までの十一年間とする。

一つ、アスタリスクにおける学生が《星武祭》へ参加できる回数は、三回を上限とする。

万応素(マナ)

《落星雨》によって地球にもたらされた未知の元素。現在では世界中に拡散し、どこにでも存在する。特定の条件を満たした生物の意志に反応し、周囲の元素を巻き込みながらあらゆる事象・物質へと変化する。

星脈世代(ジェネステラ)

万応素の影響を受けて誕生した新人類。既存の人類を遥かに凌ぐ身体能力と、星辰力と呼ばれるオーラを持つ。中でも生身で万応素とリンクできる異能者は、女性ならば《魔女(ストレガ)》、男性ならば《魔術師(ダンテ)》と呼ばれる。

一般社会においては潜在的な差別意識が存在し、そのためにアスタリスクへやって来る学生も少なくない(その差別意識は《星武祭》への批判が多数派にならない理由の一つである)。

星辰力(プラーナ)

星脈世代が持つ特殊なオーラ。《魔女》や《魔術師》は能力を使用するごとに星辰力を消費する。これを使い果たすと意識が消失するが、基本的には時間とともに回復する。星辰力のコントロールは《星脈世代》の基本技術であり、星辰力を集中させることによって攻撃力や防御力を増加させることができる。特に防御面ではその効果が著しい。武器を使った戦闘が日常茶飯事でありながら、アスタリスクの学生達が致命的なケガを負うことが少ない理由はここにある。

落星工学

万応素や《落星雨》で落ちてきた隕石に関する学問。万応素の働きについては未知の部分が多いものの、隕石に多く含まれていたレアメタルを利用したマナダイトの研究は進んでおり、広く実用化されている。

マナダイト

万応素が結晶化した特殊な鉱石。一定の負荷を与えることにより特定の元素パターンを記憶・固定化する性質を持つ。元来地球上には存在せず、《落星雨》によって落ちてきた隕石から採掘される。煌式武装の起動体として使用されるほか、落星工学によって生み出された工業製品の多くに用いられている。

煌式武装(ルーカス)

マナダイトをコアに利用した武具の総称。マナダイトに元素パターンを記憶させることにより、発動体からその素体を具現化することができる。周囲の万応素を集約することにより、光状の刃や弾丸を生成する。また、動力自体も万応素から抽出している。

ウルム=マナダイト

極めて純度の高いマナダイトの総称。通常のマナダイトに比べて希少であり、これをコアに用いた煌式武装は純星煌式武装と呼ばれる。色や形も様々で、同じものは二つとない。意思を持つとされる。

純星煌式武装(オーガルクス)

ウルム=マナダイトをコアに利用した武器の総称。特殊な能力を秘めるものが多いが、その反面様々な「代償」を必要とする。さらに武器自体に意思のようなものが宿っており、使い手との相性によっては触れることさえできない。相性は適合率として測定される。

その多くは統合企業財体が所有しており、各学園へ管理を委任し、適合率の高い学生に貸し出す形でアスタリスクへ提供されている。

References

1. ↑ 九輪 "Nine-Tower" Nine vertically stacked rings on the spire of a Japanese-style pagoda: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/S%C5%8Drin>
2. ↑ To understand Claudia's comment requires understanding the term I've translated as "sly", i.e. 腹黒. This is used to describe a sly, calculating personality, but literally translated, 腹 means "abdomen", and 黒 means "black".
3. ↑ Kenjutsu
4. ↑ Yuan-yaki (Japanese style of grilling, using meat or fish which is marinated, impaled on long skewers, and then broiled over hot coals)
5. ↑ Agedashi tofu
6. ↑ Chikuwa
7. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vienna_Opera_Ball
8. ↑ A reference to the Nemean lion
9. ↑ Likely a reference to a Latin phrase from Ovid: "Saepe creat molles aspera spina rosas - Often the prickly thorn produces tender roses"
10. ↑ Antirrhinum Majus is more commonly known as the snapdragon.

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